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N E R O

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

A New Edition, being the Second,

GRAFFITI D'ITALIA.

In Crown Octavo.

\$ 3.00 H. Robinson
Dec 4 1878

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AN HISTORICAL PLAY

BY

W. W. STORY

EDITOR'S COPY.

From A. ROMAN & Co.

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WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

SCRIBNER, WELFORD, & ARMSTRONG

NEW YORK: MDCCCLXXV

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1875

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TO

MRS FRANCES ANN KEMBLE.

DEAR MRS KEMBLE,

This play, which was written in the summer of 1872, had been laid aside in my desk, when I had the pleasure of meeting you in Rome in the winter of 1873-74. The story of Nero, as recorded by ancient writers, and especially in the vivid sketch of Suetonius, and the more elaborated and highly-coloured pages of Tacitus, had long haunted my mind as a powerful subject for dramatic treatment, and I could not rest till I had tried my hand at it. But the enthusiasm of writing once over, many were the doubts that assailed me as to my own success in treating it, and as to the interest it might have for the public. A man's judgment upon his own work is a blind one; and having confidence in your critical ability, as well as in your frank honesty, I asked you to do me the favour to hear me read it, determined in my own mind to abide by your decision as to whether I should publish it or not. You kindly consented to my request; and a small company of friends (fit, though few) met in your apartment in Rome to hear it. It was a winter's evening—the key was turned in the door against all the world—and the reading began. You will remember

how it was suddenly interrupted by a shock of earthquake, which rattled the windows and shook the house in strange accord with the story. At its conclusion you encouraged me to print it. It belongs, therefore, to you; for without your kind words it is doubtful whether it would ever have been given to the public. I hope you will allow me to connect your name with it, and at the same time to express my high sense of your genius, and my warm appreciation of your constant friendship and kindness to me and mine. I do not, however, mean to make you responsible for it, knowing well how the best judgment is warped by friendship; nor do I mean to intimate that I have yielded to friendly pressure against my own judgment. I accept the responsibility myself,—while cordially thanking you for your kindness.

In writing this play I have striven to preserve historical truth, and to present a picture of a period characterised by cruelties and crimes which would not now be tolerated, and by passions so violent and unrestrained, that they seem to bear the brand of insanity. How far I have succeeded others must decide; but I should have less question of the success of this play if it could be read or acted by you, for by the mastery of your art you could throw over it a glamour which would conceal its defects, vivify its dulness, and heighten its merits.

Your faithful and obliged

W. W. STORY.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

NERO.

BRITANNICUS.

OTHO.

GALBA.

C. JULIUS VINDEX, Proprætor in Spain.

L. ANNÆUS SENECA,

AFRANIUS BURRHUS, Præfect of Guards, } Tutors of Nero.

SOPHONIUS TIGELLINUS, Favourite of Nero.

TITUS VINIUS, Proconsul of Spain.

CORN. LACO, Friend of Galba.

NYMPHIDIUS SABINUS, Prefect of Præet. Guards.

ANICETUS, Admiral of Fleet.

GALERIUS TROCHALUS, } Consuls.

SILIUS ITALICUS,

HELIUS.

GRANIUS, Tribune.

C. CALP. PISO, Leader of Conspirators.

FENIUS RUFUS, Senator,

SUBRIUS FLAVUS, Tribune of Guard,

FLAVIUS SCÆVINUS, Senator,

ANTONIUS NATALIS, Roman Knight,

PLAUT. LATERANUS, Senator,

LUCAN.

ANNÆUS STATIUS, } Physicians.

XENOPHON,

} Conspirators against
Nero.

MILICHUS, Freedman of Scævinus.

AGERINUS, Freedman of Agrippina.

SPORUS,

EPAPHRODITUS, } Freedmen of Nero.

MENECRATES, }

PHAON,

AGRIPPINA, Mother of Nero.

OCTAVIA, Wife of Nero.

POPPÆA, Mistress, afterwards Wife of Nero.

ACERRONIA, Friend of Agrippina.

POMPEIA PAULINA, Wife of Seneca.

GUARDS, SOLDIERS, ATTENDANTS, SERVANTS, &c.

N E R O.



ACT I.

SCENE I.—*Ante-chamber of Imperial Palace.*

NARCISSUS *and* BURRHUS.

Bur. Welcome, Narcissus! You are then returned!
And is your health restored?

Nar. Of body—yes ;
But not of mind. Unwillingly I went,
Foreboding evil, and in this short month
What changes!—what disasters! Claudius dead!—
Worse—murdered, as men say ; and in his place
Young Nero seated : while with iron hand

Stern Agrippina rules. Ah ! not in vain
Was my worst presage—all I feared is come—
Even quicker than I thought.

Bur. Things have gone fast.
One touch, and all went like an avalanche.
But Claudius brought it down upon himself
By his own folly. Never was a man
More mixed of qualities—half wit, half fool,
Wise in his books, and ignorant of men ;
A scholar and a drunkard : blundering on,
Half dreaming, and half waking, through the world,
He pulled his fate down by a stupid threat,
To set Britannicus upon the throne.
And Agrippina, startled, pushed him down
The dark declivity of death.

Nar. I know :
I warned him of his danger ; but, poor man,
He had forgot his threat within an hour,
And nothing feared.

Bur. But she did not forget.
He might have threatened aught but this and lived ;
But to touch Nero, was to touch the quick

Of Agrippina's life—to threaten him
Was fatal folly—so he paid for it.

Nar. How say you, Burrhus, what may we expect
'Neath this new order? better times or worse?

Bur. Jove knows!—not I, nor you, nor any man.
Perhaps awhile some semblance we may see
Of better things—till Nero shall grow up
And show his real nature. What he is,
Who knows? Not I—though one may guess the fruit
Knowing the parent tree.

Nar. 'Tis said he shows
A gentle disposition. You should know,
Who are his tutors, you and Seneca.

Bur. Ask Seneca, who stuffs him with wise words
And moral sentences, and thinks to guide
This tiger-cub with such weak threads of talk.
He augurs great things from him; as for me
I keep my judgment. He is timid yet—
Knows not his strength—his claws are not yet grown,
And yet at times he snaps with right good will.

Nar. You have small faith in him?

Bur. In faith, I have—

In him or any of his kith and kin.

His father was a bad and cruel man :

Violent, passionate, steeped and stained with crime ;

So were they all, the Ahenobarbi race.

As for his mother, could we hope from her

He could inherit virtue ? From each source

The strain is tainted.

Nar.

Ay, the blood is bad.

Yet let us hope, since nature overleaps

At times the parent, and again renews

Ancestral virtues, it may breed in him

The noble spirit of Germanicus.

Bur. He's too much like his father in his looks—

With his red brazen hair and bull-like neck.

Pray God he be not like his ancestor

Of whom old Crassus said—" His head is brass,

To fit his iron mouth and leaden heart."

Nar. Still let us hope—we've had enough of vice.

Bur. Hope if you will. Domitius did not hope ;

He only sneered when Agrippina showed

This new-born son—saying, " From you and me

What can be bred but ruin to the world."

Nar. And yet his first speech to the senate gave
Good promise. It was moderate, just, and calm.

Bur. Bah! that was Seneca, not Nero.

Nar. Well,
At least that phrase of his showed a good heart
When a death-warrant the first time he signed,
“I wish I knew not how to write my name.”

Bur. But still he wrote it. Trust me he will write
Or nod hereafter many a thousand more
With no such qualms or phrases.

Nar. In your hands
And Seneca's I trust for better things.

Bur. I am no prophet: what I think I say;
I'll do my best to help him. For all that,
He'll have his own way, and not ours—at last.

Nar. Say, Burrhus, was the death of Claudius
As bad as 'tis reported? Is it true
That Agrippina at the banquet board,
In presence of all guests, with baleful smile
And hypocritic words, *did* poison him?
Did she or nature in those mushrooms hide
The deadly essence? I can scarce believe

She dared commit this crime so openly.

Bur. What did she ever shrink from to attain
The end she sought? 'Twas more, yes, even more
Than rumour, which is never slow to breed
Large growths on trivial stems, hath yet avouched.
It was a hideous crime played like a farce—
A shocking farce to make the blood run cold.

Nar. Was it so bad?

Bur. Nothing could well be worse.
Hark! there are footsteps. 'Tis the empress comes.
This is no place for confidential talk—
The walls have ears and eyes. Let us be off.
I've prated now too much—beyond my wont—
When I should better far have held my tongue.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE II.—*Imperial Palace.* NERO seated at a table,
writing, a copy of Catullus near him.

Nero. That will not do. These lines are crabbed still.
They rattle like coarse pebbles in one's mouth.
By Jupiter! how hard it is to make

These easy verses ! Here I sweat and toil
Striving in vain to torture into shape
The unbending phrases, while, with scarce a care,
Catullus almost seems to breathe them forth.
From off his style how easily they run !—
What grace, what elegance, what facile power !
Just as a flower grows, with its own sweet will,
All bloom and odour—so his poems grow.

Enter AGRIPPINA. NERO hides his tablets.

Agrip. What ! writing ? Nero ! what is it you write ?

Nero. Oh, nothing—nothing.

Agrip.

Yes, I saw you hide

Your tablets as I entered. What is it ?

Show me, dear Nero. Verses, are they not ?

Nero. They are not worth your seeing ; such poor
stuff.

Besides, they are not finished.

Agrip.

Let me see,

And I will judge ; at least you will not find

A kinder critic. Read them to me, pray.

Nero. No, do not ask me. They're not finished yet.

Agrip. Well, well, my boy, I'll not insist till then ;
But then you'll show them—will you not ?

Nero. Perhaps,
If ever they are straitened into shape.

Agrip. Ask Seneca to help you.

Nero. Seneca !

He never wrote a verse 'twas fit to read.
His prose is fair enough : as for his verse,
'Tis bad as mine is : on my faith I think
'Tis even worse—'tis crabbed as his face.

Agrip. Poor Seneca ! he is not beautiful—
Not an Apollo, but a wise old man—
An excellent old man, and, as I thought,
Accomplished in his verses.

Nero. Yet he's old,
That's certain ; and he's wise, too, I suppose :
But he's a bore, as all such wise men are.
And for his verses, they're not worth a straw.

Agrip. And yet of all your friends I like him best.
Otho and Tigellinus and the rest
Lead you astray. I pray you have a care
Of all they counsel.

Nero. I'll take care of them.

Leave them alone ; don't lecture.

Agrip. I have done.

You've been to the gymnasium to-day ?

Nero. Ay, for an hour ; we had such wrestling there.

I threw Britannicus some dozen times.

He had no chance against me.

Agrip. The poor thing—

How should he ? You are twice as strong as he.

Strengthen your arms against some stronger youth.

Nero. Oh ! that was all for sport. Look ! with this
arm,

Had I the cestus on, one blow of mine

Would give him his quietus. But I fought

With one young Dacian, training for the ring,

And floored him once ; and all the crowd cried out,

“ Hail, Cæsar ! a good blow ! good blow, by Jove ! ”

And Crespius, the old gladiator, there

Cried out, “ By Jove ! he would be one of us

Were he not Cæsar.”

Agrip. Then what did you do ?

Nero. I gave an hour to music.

Agrip.

After that?

Nero. A tedious discourse from Seneca
On metaphysics and philosophy.
He bored me well with all his moral drone.

Agrip. Give heed to all his teaching. That at least
Is worth your learning—better far than all
The music—(that's for girls more than for men),
Or all the fighting—that's for pugilists
Rather than Cæsars.

Nero. 'Tis far better sport
Than playing Cæsar ; wearying out one's life
With tiresome business, audiences dull,
Signing of warrants—all that sort of thing.
Sometimes I wish I were not Cæsar, then
Life would be free to do just what I chose.

Agrip. Well, leave to me all tasks that I can do.
Please yourself, Nero—I will bear your load.

Nero. Thanks, mother.

Agrip. Yet be careful what you do.
Amuse yourself, but play no foolish pranks
To sink you in the world's esteem. Be firm,
Devote your hours to study, seek to win

By noble conduct the applause of Rome.
So shall you firmly sit upon your throne.
Go not with low companions ; wear not out
In foul debauch your manhood ; keep a rein
On all you do and say, and leave to me
The manage of the court. All I will do
As I have ever done, dear boy, for you.

Nero. Oh yes ! yes ! yes ! I'll leave that all to you ;
But there you are again, preaching again.
Nothing I hate like that. Manage the court,
Manage all public things. Your hand is sure,
And none could do it better.

Agrip. My dear son,
It is a mother's joy and pride to serve
The child she loves. Oh what a day it was
When, with a shout that seemed to rend the air,
The army hailed you Cæsar ! My poor heart
Shook like the standards straining to the breeze
With that great cheer of triumph. All my toil
Then seemed as nothing. I had won the prize.
Yes, in that moment's thrill of wild, sharp joy,
I was repaid for all ; and had I died

There on the spot, I should have felt my life
Full, satisfied, brimmed up to overflow
With joy and triumph. One such hour as that
Outweighs long years of common life—repays
The struggle and the toil that gendered it ;
And all the past pain lying dark behind,
Shows like night's background for the lightning flash
Of one keen vivid joy to blaze against.
“ Hail, Cæsar ! Hail ! ” I seem to hear that shout
Still ringing in my ears : oft in dead night
It startles me from sleep, and in my dreams
Again it thrills me ; and again I stride
With you beside me through these sounding halls,
And feel—’Tis ours now ! wholly yours and mine.
Ah ! when I clasped you then within my arms
I felt that life, whatever it might bring,
Could never lift me up again so high.
Never ! No, never ! For my heart was full ;
It could not hold one other smallest drop.
Embrace me, Nero !—Cæsar ! my grand boy !
Swear you will love me always—ne’er forget
That ’twas my hand, my will, that placed you here—

My foot that trampled down all obstacles—
My heart on which you mounted to the throne.
Love me ; I ask no more. That pays for all.

Nero. Be calmer, mother. I shall not forget.

Agrip. Promise me, Nero !

Nero. Ay ; I promise you.

Agrip. That's my dear boy ! Embrace me once
again !

Oh, Nero ! Nero ! what were all the world
Should you desert me ?

Nero. Do you fear me, then,
That with such passion you invoke my love ?

Agrip. Ah, yes ! I fear—I fear ; who would not fear,
When all one's life is thrown upon one stake,
That, lost, would bring disaster, ruin, death ?
For there are evil tongues to slander me ;
Others will strive to win from me your love—
Seek to distort your mind, bewray your thoughts,
And prompt you to rebel against this heart
That only beats for you. Oh, listen not
To their base promptings ! Close your ears against
Their foul suggestions. If they say with crime

I stained my hands to place you on the throne,
Remember 'twas for you alone I wrought ;
For what had I to gain by any move—
What was there more for me? I stood as high
As woman could. If ever in my soul
Ambition gnawed, it was to lift you up.
Oh, ever keep this present in your mind !
Promise me, Nero.

Nero. Ay, I will—I will.

I know the debt I owe you. There's no need
To insist so strongly. Chase your fears away.

Agrip. I will. Forgive me if I seem to make
Too close a claim. I will not keep you more.
Where go you now?

Nero. To Otho.

Agrip. Steel your heart
Against Poppæa's charms. What do you there?

Nero. We sing and play.

Agrip. Does she sing well? I hear
Her voice is weak, and she has little skill.

Nero. Who says so? 'Twas some idiot told you
that.

Her voice is charming. No one here in Rome
Sings half so well.

Agrip. Indeed !

Nero. Her voice weak ! Ah !

It must have been Octavia told you that.

Agrip. Octavia ? No !

Nero. Who was it ?

Agrip. On my word

I cannot say.

Nero. It must have been some fool

Who knows not how to sing ; or else, perhaps,
Some jealous woman. Why do women speak
Such slanders of each other ?

Agrip. Who can tell ?

Nero. Farewell, my mother. Have I leave to go ?

Agrip. Farewell, dear Nero ! Go, enjoy yourself,
But fall not captive to Poppæa's charms.

Nero. No fear of that. Farewell !

[*Exit* NERO.]

Agrip. Ah, well ! Ah, well !

Can any one on earth be quite content ?

Why should I thus torment myself with fears ?

All things seem smooth at last. But still I fear ;
Though nothing tangible—no real thing
Now seems to threaten. I'll not think of it.
What if Poppæa win him, and with wiles
Possess his spirit, and then strive to mount
Upon my bended neck into my place ?
Nonsense ! She would not dare. Let her but try.
Who's there ? Ah ! Seneca !

SENECA *enters.*

Sen. Salve, my liege !

Agrip. I know your news ! The Senate means to
send

A formal deputation to commend
Our Cæsar for his policy of state,
And for his wise and liberal government.
Is't not so, Seneca ?

Sen. Madame, it is.

Since Nero mounted to the throne, the change
From the loose conduct of the previous time
To firm and steady guidance shows so clear,
The Senate seek to mark it by some sign

Of outward approbation. To this end,
A deputation of grave senators—
Men of high note and birth—will wait on him,
To vouch their joy at this most grateful change.

Agrip. When do they come?

Sen. To-morrow, at high
noon.

Agrip. Is Cæsar ready to receive them then?
Has he his speech prepared?

Sen. Madame, he has.

Agrip. And have you read it?—Is it well advised?

Sen. I have with strictest care gone over it,
Added suggestions, changes; in its form
Somewhat arranged it, till to me it seems
Most fitting—if he only keeps to it.

Agrip. Be sure he does. I, too, will counsel him.
Have you the draft of it?

Sen. 'Tis in my room.

Agrip. See that you send it to me then to-day.

Sen. Madame, I will.

Agrip. All seems to promise well.
If Nero will but keep a steady rein

On all his conduct, he may live to be
The greatest of our Cæsars. Look to it,
My Seneca, I trust so much to you.
He yet is young and plastic, and I think
We two may mould him to a noble form.

Sen. Madame, I strive to fill his mind with thoughts
Fit for his station, and to fire his soul
With high ambitions. He is young as yet,
And sometimes strains against the leash, but still
Not more than any youth ; nor you, nor I
Would wish to see his youthful fire stamped out.
To you he yields the reins, and 'tis your hand
Has given firmness to his government.
Happy the youth with such a hand to guide.

Agrip. So, then, the Senate is indeed content?
That pleases me. How feels the populace?

Sen. Nero has won their perfect confidence
By his kind manners and his gracious acts.
They all throw up their caps with joyous shouts,
Whene'er they see him ; and with such frank grace,
Such modest bearing, their applause he takes,
He wins new favour from them every day.

In every street, in every public square,
In every group, you hear with one assent
The praise of Cæsar, and rejoicings bold
That Claudius reigns no more. If, at the first,
Whispers were heard, and dubious faces seen,
That is gone by. The weight of doubt and fear
Seems lifted from the State, and hope sits light
In every heart, as if a darkening cloud
Had passed, and sunshine settled over Rome.

Agrip. This glads my heart ; and yet, the populace
Is ever fickle, veering like a vane
To every varying current in the air.
How is the army? That the anchor is
Unto the ship of state. If that is firm,
All things are firm.

Sen. They, too, rejoice in him.
His strength,—his practice of athletic arts,—
His easy manners,—his light-hearted whims,—
All please the soldiers. When old Claudius went,
Half dreaming, with abstracted look, slow walk,
And awkward presence, through the camp, a smile,
Not over-flattering, ever followed him ;

But when our Nero, with his sunny hair,
Strong as a Hercules, with sinewy arms,
Quick gait, and laughing voice, among them goes,
Saluting this one with a jest, and this
With artful praise ; and trying now and then
Like some strong boy, rejoicing in his strength,
The wrestler's grip, to test which is the best,
The whole camp follows him, and shout on shout
Makes the air ring. Yes ! he has won them all.

Agrip. He lacks in dignity : it is his wont
Over familiar with all men to be.
That pays at first, perhaps, but fails at last.
Men laugh at first with one who treats them thus ;
Then lose respect ; and end with open jeer.
He should be cautious not to overstep
The limits of his rank. Kind courtesy
Is ever winning, till it pass beyond
The bounds of self-respect and dignity.
I would not have him formal, stern, and stiff,
Nor yet too free and liberal of himself.
We must expect to take just as we give.
Weak condescension often tends to breed

Presumption, licence, and destroys respect.

Counsel him, Seneca, to alter this.

Sen. It is his nature, and thus far it works
To win him friends. He slowly can withdraw
If need there be.

Agrip. Let him not go too far.
Does this please Burrhus? He's a soldier rough,
And knows the army. Let him drop a hint,
And Nero will take heed, perhaps, of him,
More than of you and me, in such a case.

Sen. Madame, I'll speak with him.

Agrip. I pray you, do.
I would not in the freshness of his reign,
Even on the threshold, he should miss a step.
We, then, must keep him straight in outward forms ;
And as for weightier things, my hand meanwhile
Shall hold the helm of State and steer for him.

SCENE III.—*Hall in Palace.*TIGELLINUS *and* *Gladiators.*

Tigel. Try not your strength too rudely, if you place
A value on your lives. You two are here
To try a fall with him. Fall underneath!

1st Glad. I shall, my lord.

Tigel. But strain him to his best;
Yield not too lightly, or 'twill anger him;
He knows your strength.

1st Glad. I understand, my lord.

Tigel. (to 2d Glad.) And you, forget not that you
drive him hard.

Put him to all he knows—to his last fence.

But—silence!—there he comes.

NERO *enters.*

Nero. Salve, good friends!

Both. Salve, great Cæsar!

Nero. Let me see your arm.
What thews!—what muscle!—why, 'tis hard as steel!

Mine, too, look, 'tis as large almost as yours.

1st Glad. 'Tis a strong arm—it needs but exercise
To make it serve the very best of us.
Mine was not half so firm when I was young.

Nero. Well! shall we try a bout?

1st Glad.

If you command.

[*They wrestle. After a time NERO
throws the Gladiator.*]

Tigel. Bravo! my Cæsar! 'twas well thrown, by
Jove!

Nero. You did not do your best!

1st Glad.

I did, my lord.

You were too quick for me at that last turn.
You're younger; but I think the second time
You would not catch me thus.

Nero.

Try it again.

[*They wrestle again—NERO is thrown.*]

Tigel. Your foot slipped, Cæsar!

Nero.

Ay! this cursed floor!

'Twas not a fair fall. Try it once again.

[*They wrestle again. NERO throws
the Gladiator heavily.*]

1st Glad. 'Twas a rough fall. I will not try again.
You are too young—too quick ; I'm not your match.

Nero. Well ; let us breathe a little, and meantime
Get the swords ready.

2d Glad. They are here, my lord.

Nero. What say you, Tigellinus ? This man here
I just have thrown, is of the first force, they say ;
Are you not, friend ?

1st Glad. Ten prizes have I gained
In the arena.

Nero. Ten ?

1st Glad. Ay, Cæsar, ten !

Nero. Do you hear, Tigellinus ?

Tigel. Cæsar, ay !
The ten were not like you on whom he gained
His victories.

Nero. What do you mean ? You think,
Because I'm Cæsar, that he put not out
His strength against me.

Tigel. Nay, I meant not that.
But neck and shoulders, Cæsar, like to yours
One does not daily meet. You are more lithe :

Your muscles come to play more readily.

If he is stronger, you are quicker far.

1st Glad. That's it—he is too quick for me by far!

Now, in sheer strength, I think I am the best!—

I ought to be, trained for these many years;

But Cæsar has a sudden knack, a trick,

That in an instant sets at naught my strength.

Nero. You flatter.

1st Glad. Nay, I flatter not. I feel

That fall still in my back—'twas a rough fall.

Nero (throws him a purse of gold). Cure it with that,
my friend.

1st Glad. Thanks, Cæsar, thanks!

Nero. Now for the swords—I'm breathed enough—
the swords!

[*Swords are brought and measured.*]

2d Glad. Shall we stand thus?

Nero. Ay! Are you ready?

Now!

[*They fight—NERO touches his adversary.*]

Nero. A touch!

Tigel. Stop!

2d Glad. I confess it—on my arm.

Nero. That's one! In guard—so!

There's another touch.

2d Glad. Cæsar, you strike too hard for play.

Tigel. Why, look!

The blood is oozing from your shoulder, there.

2d Glad. Had Cæsar's sword been steel instead of
wood,

I had not fought another round this month.

Nero. I did not mean to strike so hard. Indeed,
I'm sorry if I hurt you.

2d Glad. Oh, 'tis naught!

Yet had the sword been steel, and had we stood

On the arena's sand, that blow of yours

Had done my business thoroughly enough.

I should have heard that sudden yell and jeer

From all the circle of wild eager mouths,

Descending on me like a curse. That's all!

Thank heaven! the swords are wood, and we are two.

Nero. Here, staunch his blood—and here's my hand,
my friend!

And when your shoulder's mended come again.

Meantime, this purse : and (*to attendant*) set them in
some room

A supper ; let them have good meat and wine—

Wine of the best, as much as they will drink.

May you enjoy it, friends ! and now farewell !

1st and 2d Glad. Salve, great Cæsar !

Nero.

If you have a

want

Cæsar can satisfy—ask—it is yours.

(*To attendant.*) See, if these men come, they have au-
dience

Upon the instant—at whatever time.

Come, Tigellinus ! So again farewell !

[*Exeunt* TIGELLINUS and NERO.]

1st Glad. A great boy !

2d Glad.

For a boy, he hits hard blows.

I like it not.

1st Glad. He paid you well.

2d Glad.

He did.

And still I rather would strike back again

Than have his money. When I feel the sting

Of a sharp blow, my blood thrills till I strike

With all my might. But here one's hands are tied.
Had he not been the Cæsar!

1st Glad.

Ay, my friend,

I understand; but still his gold rings well.

Hark to it (*throws it up*): that's a jingle worth a blow.

2d Glad. Bah! for the blow itself, who cares for that!

Come! shall we trudge?—our business here is done.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE IV.—NERO'S *room.*

SENECA *and* NERO.

Nero. Stand by me, Seneca. My mother's hand
Hath won for me the throne. I owe her all,
And yet she spies upon me over much,
And lectures me as if I were a child.
Give me your counsel. Shall I bend to her,
Or shall I brave her?

Sen.

You are Cæsar now.

Your mother only seeks your good; but yet,

Being a mother, sees, the last of all,
Her son has grown a man. Yet bear with her ;
Though she outstrain her guidance—bear with her.
'Tis these first months will make or mar your reign :
Look that you stumble not. Her hand is sure.
Lean much on her.

Nero. What shall I do, good friend?

You are a man, and know what men expect.

Sen. Be moderate and courteous in your acts ;
Shun cruelty and rapine ; wear a face
Of kindness to the Plebs ; abstain from blood ;
Rein up your passions ; and do no man hurt :
So shall you win full favour from the world
That spies you closely now in these first days.
And for the rest—though you are young and stirred
By fiery passions—as youth ever is—
Still strive to curb them within certain bounds.
Excess is evil. Yet I would not preach
Too great restriction. We are young but once.
Be firm and wary in your public acts ;
And for your private pleasures, so they keep
Within due limit, you may yield to them.

Nero. Little I care for public acts of state
So I my private freedom may possess ;
Yet these my mother strictly would restrain,
And irks me with her thralldom. She it is
That forced my marriage with Octavia. Why?
Reasons of state require it—so she says.
Am I a slave, then, that I must obey?
Or am I Cæsar?

Sen. None can stand so high
That duty stands not higher. Cæsar himself,
Would he preserve his power, must also bear
His load of duty.

Nero. So, in faith, it seems :
Cæsar is but a slave like other men.

Sen. Absolute freedom none on earth can know ;
Beside, what is this burden you lament?—
That you have won and wed a noble bride,
Pure, good, and innocent, and of lineage high.

Nero. Good—innocent—and pure—yes, she is that ;
So is a cold, white, water-blooded fish.
Her smile gives me a chill. She says, “ I love,”
Just as a sign-post says, “ Seven miles to Rome.”

I have to rinse my mouth after her kiss,
Or think of Acte just to sweeten it.
Oh Acte ! that's another sort of fruit,
As like her as a turnip to a peach.
'Tis all my mother's doings, Seneca ;
I would rebel against her, did I dare.

Sen. Acte is beautiful. Yet have a care.
Keep out of sight your love. 'Twere worse for all—
You, Acte, me—ay, every one of us—
If once the empress dreamed we sought to thwart
Her firm-fixed purpose. If you will indulge
Your love for Acte, do it in the dark.

Nero. Trust me for that. She does not yet suspect.

Sen. Make sure of it. She does not show her
hand

Until she strikes. Wear an obedient face ;
Keep an obedient tongue within your lips ;
Profess, at least, you love Octavia.

Nero. That is impossible ; I cannot do it.

Sen. A Cæsar's earliest lesson is to feign :
Why should you utter all you think and feel
Like some loud-mouthed uneducated boor ?

The face was made to veil and hide our thoughts ;
The lips to lock the mouth from foolish speech ;
And idle words have cost more human lives
Than busy deeds. Keep guard on what you say,
And ever let your acts precede your words.

Nero. Ay, but she irks me so at times : in vain
I seek to curb my tongue or oil my speech.
I must break out. Silence is worse than death.

Sen. Still seek to curb it—only boys swear out ;
Men keep their peace. All passion when repressed
Gives force to action—wings the arrow home
With the strained tension of its utmost bend.
Silence is ever strong, and talking weak ;
And many a purpose wastes in empty words
Which might, restrained, have gendered earnest acts.
Gabble and Babble are but empty fools,
But Silence is a God. They threaten most
Who know that they are weak to work their will.
The strong man strikes like lightning, without threat ;
Nor lets the thunder first announce its bolt.
But the weak woman rails and wastes in words.
Speech is so easy ; but the word once flown,

No power of man or God can bring it back.
On, on it goes for ever, with what brood
The Fates may choose, born of its teeming womb.
No, Nero, be a man ; within yourself
Keep your own counsel. Wear a kindly face
Unto Octavia ; and at least profess
An outward love.—whatever you may feel.
And for the rest, where your true passions look,
Senecio and myself will lend our aid.
Yet all are weak against the empress' will :
Let her not scent the trail on which you move,
Or woe to Acte—woe to all of us !

Nero. May I not trust Senecio ?

Sen.

Not too far.

He is a profligate and libertine ;
And though at times such servants we may use,
We should beware of trusting them too far.
Such staffs break when we lean too hard on them.
Better Petronius—he's of sterner stuff,
Loose in his morals, but of sounder mind—
He will arrange your pastimes. I am old—
My blood is chilled—I cannot help you there.

My head and heart are yours—use him as hands.

Nero. I will, good Seneca. Keep watch for me,
And shield me from my mother. 'Tis her eye,
Her hand, her power, I fear. Shield me from her ;
And now farewell.

Sen. Where go you, Cæsar, now ?

Nero. Nay, do not ask, and so you will not know,
And silence, as you say, alone is strong.

SCENE V.—*Empress's room.*

AGRIPPINA *and* OCTAVIA.

Oct. He loves me not—why should I marry him ?

Agrip. He loves you not !—why, what a child you are !
What matters love ?—'tis but a month's disease,
A short-lived fever of the youthful blood,
A sharp delirium of the sense, that's all,
For common girls to prate about—but you—
You, Cæsar's daughter, should have higher aims,

Higher ambitions than to sigh and pule,
And kiss, and languish life away for love.

Oct. But I have no ambition. Oh that Fate
Had placed me in a humbler, lowlier rank,
Where I might lead a happy, peaceful life,
Beyond the cares and turmoils of a court!

Agrip. Fate has not placed you there: even if you
would,

You cannot stoop to petty joys like these;
You were not littered like the common crowd,
Only to eat and sleep, and smile and play,
Or work and starve, and toil and cry for food,
And wear your life away, a vulgar drudge.
No! You were born to rule—born on the steps
That lead up to a throne! Will you lie there
And weep and whine, the jeer of all the world,
Or rise and mount, your hand in Cæsar's hand?

Oct. I would I never had been born to this,
But Fate so wills it. I must drink my cup,
Bitter or sweet, such as it is. And yet
Had I the choice how different were the life—
How different were the lot that I should choose!—

I hear a better note. You envy me !
Do then as I do. The great joy that lasts
Longer than love, longer than hate, ay, long
As life itself, is power—*that* never dies.
To gather in your hand the reins of rule,
And drive the world before you as you will—
To extort obedience—sway men's destinies—
Curb, turn, stop, urge them to your absolute course.
There is no joy, no triumph like to this.
Taste it, Octavia, once, and you will smile
As you look back on your tame dream of peace.

Oct. I am not fit for it. I can admire
The chariot-driver in the passionate race,
Who in the tumult—in the roar, the dust,
The maddening motion and the mob's acclaim,
Keeps o'er himself command—swerves here and there,
Balks danger—seizes just the time and place,
Ne'er losing nerve, and triumphs at the goal.
I can admire—I could not imitate.

Agrip. Think you the first time that he drove his steeds
His nerves were firm? Long training for long years
Taught him that skill. He failed an hundred times

Before he triumphed. So it is with all.
Nature demands her pay for what she gives.
She does not throw her prizes like largesse
Into the laps of those that dream and doze.
If you would win the prize, train for the fight.

Oct. No! no! I am not fit—should never be;
It is not in my blood.

Agrip. Your blood is mine.

Oct. Oh! but with such a difference. I think
There's not a drop of Cæsar's blood in me.

Agrip. Is it your mother's blood runs in your veins?
She was not wont to flinch at obstacles.

Oct. I am a poor slip.

Agrip. Nay, Octavia, dear,
You are a dear good child; and you to me
Shall be indeed a child, and help me shape
Our handsome Nero to some noble end.
He is so handsome, and so free and frank,
That one must love him. Wild as a young colt.
But who would wish him otherwise? Not I,
Nor you, Octavia: surely time will tame
Those youthful ardours into calm resolve.

One could not have him weak, and poor, and cowed,
And you must help me mould him to our will.

Oct. Easier to say than do ; but I will try.

Agrip. Keep up your spirits, child ! pluck up a heart !
Taunt Nero, dare him, win him as one wins
A fortress or a battle. Do not yield,
And sigh, and droop, and languish for his love,
But struggle with him—clash your wits with his—
Laugh at him—tempt him. You are fair and young—
Have wit and spirit, but you make no play
With all your gifts. Nothing a man desires
Like fruit that he must climb and strain to pluck ;
What drops into his hand, he will not taste.
Anger him first, then soothe him—tease him well—
Don't follow him with such a timid air,
As if you grieved to vex him. Use the arts
That women have : deny him what he wants—
Feign, flatter, tease—you'll have him at your feet.

Oct. Oh ! if he but loved me but a little bit ;
Or if he hated, something I might do.
But no ; 'tis simple blank indifference
He feels for me. I bore him—that's the truth.

Agrip. Use then the arts that any common girl
Of the Hetairæ knows so well to use ;
Pluck from their books a leaf—only a leaf.

Oct. I cannot do it, for I know them not.

Agrip. Well, learn them then ! Think well on what
I say.

All will be right at last. Ah ! who is there ?
Oh, Pallas !

Enter PALLAS.

Pal. Salve !

Agrip. Leave us now, my child.

[*Exit* OCTAVIA.]

What news, dear Pallas ? In your face I see
Something has vexed you.

Pal. Yes, love, I am vexed.

Agrip. What is it, say, my Pallas ? Sit you down,
And let me hear it. How your hair
Is tumbled up ? Let me arrange it. There !
Well, dear, what is it ?

Pal. Nothing, love, to me.
I'm vexed because I know you will be vexed.

Agrip. I? let me hear it then at once.

Pal.

That fool,

Senecio,—that Senecio who, you know,

I urged you should be kept from Nero's path,

And whom you laughed at as a fool—whose wit

Was scarce enough to guide him home at night——

Agrip. Well!

Pal.

At Petronius' house last night I met

This same Senecio. We'd a supper there,

And he lay next to me. The wine was good, .

The mirth loud, and Senecio drank too much,

Losing the little wit he has, and then

In maudlin confidence he leaned on me

And whispered "So, she thinks in the great house

To marry Nero to Octavia!

Bah! bah!" and then he laughed. "Why Bah?"

said I.

"It makes me laugh," he hiccupped. "Such a joke!"

"What joke? explain," I said. "Why, don't you know

We've started Nero on a better game?

Oh! she's a choice rare morsel! By the gods!

Fit for an emperor, Acte is, by Jove!

Greek—oh, so pretty ! so bewitching too !
And Nero goes there daily ! What a joke !
And she at the great house suspects it not !”
And then the idiot laughed.

Agrip. What !—what !—go on.

Pal. “Why do you laugh so there? What is the jest?”
Petronius called ; and then Senecio cried,
Stuffing into his mouth the while a fig,
“ Why, Acte ! and to think they know it not !
And he head and ears in love with her !
Mad ! mad ! for love of that gay little girl !”
“ Hush ! hush !” Petronius said, “ you idiot, you !—
You know not what you say.” “ Oh ! don’t I though ?”
He hiccupped out. “ Poor, dear Octavia !
Oh, what a mess ! oh, what a charming mess !”
With that they rose and huddled him away,
And after that was done, Petronius came
And sat by me and whispered, “ Never mind
A word Senecio says. He’s drunk, you see,
And how this nonsense got into his head,
Who knows ? ’Tis folly, every word of it.”
“ Of course,” I said, “ I know Senecio’s drunk.”

And then pretending to give no more heed
To what he said, we shifted the discourse.
But 'tis all true. I'll gauge my life on it.
I saw it in the faces of them all.

Agrip. Oh, he shall answer for it with his life!

Pal. I came at once to give you this bad news.
What's to be done?

Agrip. Tear out Senecio's tongue
If he have lied. If not, why, all the same,
Tear out his tongue: and then—then—O ye gods!
If it is true! I'll test him on the spot.
Call Nero, Pallas. Call him—do you hear?

Pal. Pause—think—resolve—before you speak. The
way,
If this be true, with dangers is beset.
Nero you cannot force. Keep calm, I pray.

Agrip. Oh, what a blind and stupid fool I am!

Pal. Govern your rage—'tis just—but govern it.
See, Agrippina, were it not the best,
To feign to Nero ignorance of it all?
Then find out Acte, and away with her—
Hide her from out his sight; nor let him dream

That you suspect him—drive her back to Greece.

Agrip. I must see Nero—see him now at once.
Go call him, Pallas.

Pal. Agrippina, pause !

Agrip. Call him—or I will. Oh ! I cannot live
Till I have torn this thing up by the roots !

Pal. I go ; but by the love I bear to you,
By all the love you say you bear to me,
Oh, Agrippina ! act with caution. Probe
The heart out of this matter ere you act.

Agrip. I will. Now, go ! He's in the library.

[*Exit* PALLAS.]

Can it be true ? Oh yes ; I feel it is !
What shall I do ? I must be calm—be calm,
Though all my thoughts are raging like the sea
When the storm strikes it. Yes ; I must be calm,
Put on a false sweet face and smile and feign.
Where were my eyes ?—where were my eyes ? Great
Jove !

That this thing should go on before my face,
And I not know it. And who is she, then ?—
This Acte ?—that she dares to cope with me ?

Who is she that with dire insidious ways
Steals in to tear away the lion-cub
From his own dam? Ah! there he is at last!

Enter NERO.

Nero. You wish to see me, mother?

Agrip. Ay, my son.

Come, sit beside me. What's that book you have?

Nero. Ovidius Naso.

Agrip. You were reading, then,
When Pallas called you?

Nero. Ay, his Art of Love.

Agrip. Ay, love indeed makes use of many arts;
Some innocent, on nature grafted, that breed
A sweeter flower than Nature owned before.
It was this very theme on which I spoke
Only this morning to Octavia.
She said she had no arts; the simple child
Could only love; but knew no artful means
To win love back.

Nero. Ay, that is true enough;
Yet 'tis not Art, but Nature, that she needs—

Heat, passion, blood—ay, in a word—a heart.

Agrip. A heart? A tenderer, gentler heart ne'er beat
In woman's bosom.

Nero. Oh, 'tis tame enough,
Or gentle, if you please to call it so!
Passions she's none—she would not move a mouse.

Agrip. And yet she loves you, Nero.

Nero. Loves me—she!
Such love as hers is tasteless, vapid, flat
As tepid water.

Agrip. And you like strong drink?

Nero. At least some life, zest, spirit—who does not?

Agrip. Life, zest—'tis vice, I fear, you mean.

Nero. Perhaps!

Agrip. And after this all gentle things seem tame.
Sweet, innocent love, affections virgin, fresh,
Pure thoughts—pure feelings—want the sting of sin,
And do not please your palate. Oh! I see!
Some miserable jade, with wily arts
Hath caught you in her calculated toils,
And means to lime and use you for her ends.
Is it not so? Avow it. Some poor fool

With painted cheeks, and all those arts of love
Engendered in the hotbed of foul thought,
And practised, after all the zest is gone,
To lure her victim—she has fallen on you—
Am I not right?

Nero. What mean you by these words?
Because I call Octavia tame, at once,
All unprovoked, you conjure up a shape—
A nameless, shadowy shape to taunt me with.

Agrip. Oh, I could name her!

Nero. Name her, if you can.

Agrip. No matter what her name is, such as she
Have different names for every different dupe—
Lais, or Phryne, if she be a Greek—
Or Acte—that's the name of one of them,
So I have heard, and she of all the worst.

Nero. No, she is not.

Agrip. Ah, ha! my random bolt
Strikes home then, does it? 'Tis this Acte, then—
This Acte—never shake your head—I say
'Tis Acte! Do not seek to brave it out;
Your face betrays you.

Nero.

'Tis a lie, I say.

Who told you? Pallas? Miserable wretch!

Agrip. So! you are fallen to this. Oh, I had thought
You at a loftier quarry would have flown!
You!—Cæsar!—fallen into the first pit
This Greek!—this Acte!—this poor painted thing!—
This slave!—who has not even in her veins
Free blood!—this creature who in her embrace
Has hugged God knows how many dirty slaves!—
This public painted creature one may buy
For a few copper coins!

Nero.

It is not so.

I will not hear her so befouled by you.
Ay, she is poor; but in her wealth of heart
Richer than worlds of tame Octavias.
Painted! I wish you had some paint like hers
To lend Octavia, or to use yourself.

Agrip. Insult me not! Remember who I am!
Your mother! Take less licence when you speak.

Nero. I will not be abused and trampled on,
For all you are my mother. I will not hear
A poor girl railed at, vilified, and soiled

In name and fame, merely because she's poor—
Merely because she has been kind to me.

Agrip. Kind to you! Oh, you boy! you senseless
boy!

Nero. I am no boy! I am a man! and, more,
Am Cæsar!

Agrip. Cæsar! so you are indeed;
But do you act like Cæsar? You to stoop
To such a posture; you to creep and crawl
And drag the imperial robes in filth like this?
Throw off this woman. Bid her go her way.
What does she care for you? It is your power,
Your wealth, she covets. She would suck your blood,
And spread her gilded wings and fly from you
Once she is satiate, like a poisonous fly.
Love you! She loves your money—loves the power
Your fancy gives her: at yourself she laughs.
Come back to decency—to better thoughts;
Come to Octavia—do not break her heart.
Throw not that jewel in the sea to wear
A common pebble from the filthy shore—
Cast off this Acte!—cast her off, I say!

Nero. Ay, you have had your youth, then leave me
mine.

Abandon Acte ! Ay, perhaps I may
When you abandon Pallas. 'Tis his breath
Has blown this tempest. Cast him off—and then
Ask me to cast off Acte ! Who is he
That he should lord it over you and me—
Stalk at your side—whisper his craft to you,
And set you thus against me, as he does ?

Agrip. 'Tis not so, Nero ; Pallas is a man
Of great resource and power, to whom you owe
Even more than I.

Nero. I hate him.

Agrip. If you knew
Who were your best friends, you would cling to him.

Nero. I know my friends.

Agrip. And so do I. I know
The profligate Senecio, your dear friend,
Who lured you to this woman, and who shares,
Perchance, the booty, while both laugh at you.
You shall not be their tool, their jest, their butt—

Nay, you shall hear me ! Shake not thus your head.
Acte must go ! You must abandon her,
Or——

Nero. Well ; or what ?

Agrip. Or I will see to it.

Nero. You threaten her ?

Agrip. I say that she shall go.

Nero. Leave her alone. She never injured you.

Agrip. Yes ! when she injures you, she injures me.

Jove knows to what height her ambition soars.

May be this creature covets even the throne.

Nero. She covets nothing.

Agrip. Oh, I know their ways !

They are so humble—so ingenuous. Pah !

So sweet—so self-denying ; out on them

And their hypocrisy ! Even now I see

How she has changed you. A few months ago

You had not braved me as you brave me now.

This is her teaching. She has set your heart

Against Octavia and me. Your tone

Is now defiant. You would throw us off

For that insidious wheedling slave. I say
She shall away—I will not have her here!

Nero. Touch her—and every touch I will revenge.

Agrip. You threaten me?

Nero. Then leave me free, and I

Will leave you free—you and your lover too.
Pallas may lord it here, and strut, and scold;
But every blow at Acte aimed shall fall
On Pallas' head. Be very sure of that.

Agrip. So you mean war. You at your mother
throw

The gage of battle. Oh, ungrateful boy!

Nero. I'm not ungrateful—and I'm not a boy.
It is for you to choose how we shall stand;
And, by your leave, I've had enough of this.
Farewell.

Agrip. I hope you will repent of this.

[*Exit* NERO.]

Repent of it! Ay, that, I swear, he shall!
But, oh, before me rises a black cloud,
And in its breast is tempest! Gracious Jove!

Will my own son defy me? will my blood—
My own blood rise against me? No! no! no!
I'll not believe it! Yet, I fear—I fear!
Pallas was right; I should have feigned to him,
And swept her out of Rome. A single nod
Had done that work. Now 'tis too late. Oh fool!

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END OF ACT I.

A C T II.



SCENE I.—*Room of Agrippina.*

ACERRONIA *and* AGRIPPINA.

Agrip. What have you, Acerronia? Give it me!

Acer. Madame,—a letter—Pallas sends to you.

Agrip. A letter? Give it me. (*Looks at it.*) 'Tis
not from him;

'Tis my son's writing, surely; what is this?

“Nero unto Poppæa. The delight

Of your dear presence yesterday was marred

In that you did not to my love respond

With that full heart I hoped so fondly for.

All I would sacrifice to win from you

A love as wild and passionate as mine.

My heart, my fate, my life are in your hands—

You can alone dispose of it. Seek out
Some means that I may meet you secretly,
And count upon the love for ever yours
Of Nero." Ah! Whence did this letter come?

Acer. From Pallas. Tigellinus, as it seems,
Gave it to young Pythagoras, his slave,
To carry to Poppæa. He, disguised,
And taken for a girl, was at her door
Seized on by Sylla, and borne off by force.
When it was found he was a man disguised
He was set free; but in the cabinet
Where he was carried, on the floor he dropped
This letter, which a slave of Pallas found.

Agrip. Where's Pallas? I must see him instantly.

Acer. He will be here before an hour is passed.

Agrip. This must be stopped. It shall be stopped
at once.

The hypocrite! Who would have dreamed of this,
With his fair speeches! He is changed of late;
He grows more headstrong daily;—and this thing
He shall not do. No, no! You sly-faced cat,
I'll put my hand upon you ere you know!

And then, Poppæa, you shall wish to God
You had not ventured to dispute my will !
Go, Acerronia, leave me now alone ;
I must think over this. Bid Pallas come
The moment that he enters : fare you well.

SCENE II.

Enter OTHO *and* BRITANNICUS.

Brit. Well met, dear Otho ! whither go you now ?

Otho. Away from Rome. Nèro has sent me word
That Lusitania my presence needs.
I understand—a block that's in the way
Must be removed.

Brit. I do not understand :
You are his friend, on whom he seemed to lean,
His boon companion, knitted close to him,
Sharer of all he did : he cannot wish
To lose a friend like you.

Otho. Britannicus,

I have a wife, a fair—too fair—a wife ;
Nero has set his heart on her—and so
I must make clear his path ; the provinces
Demand my presence ; I must turn my back
On Rome and all its luxuries and joys :
Five hundred miles away, one cannot see
How oft one's doors are opened, or to whom.

Brit. Can it be so ? I hope you are deceived !
Nero seemed ever fond of you.

Otho. Oh yes,—

But more of my Poppæa.

Brit. What says she ?

Otho. Prays me to stay with many a pretty phrase,—
But phrases to a pretty woman are so cheap ;
And through it all, I see that the old love
She bore me once begins to pall and fade ;
Women crave ever something new,—they tire
Of their old loves as of their dresses old.
New tongues with their new flatteries whet the taste :
Besides, Jove knows what Nero promises
To dazzle her ambition. Let her go !

The path she treads is perilous, but still
It charms her onward. I have had my day,—
And, willy nilly, now must bow my head.

Brit. I am so grieved to hear it! Must you go?

Otho. I must : and so, not whining—for a man
Must take what comes, and make the best of it,
Bearing his lot with courage, all the more
That fighting with his fate can change it not,
And weeping over it will naught avail—
I take my leave. Oh, my Britannicus,
How I shall sigh through many a weary day
For our dear Rome! How many a restless night
Shall dream of her, and think me back again
In the old streets, and talking of old friends!
How many a time in dreams Poppæa's face
Will smile again on mine, as once it did,
And swear eternal faith! How many a time
Shall I awake to curse my hapless lot
And chew the bitter cud of vain regret!
What shall I do in exile? I who here
Have sailed upon the glittering crest of life,
All sails blown out with pleasure,—not a whim

Ungratified,—when lumbering there I lie
In the dead sea of exile like a log !

Brit. Indeed, I pity you ; yet, Otho, dear,
Nothing is wholly bad : the storm alone
Tries the true vessel, makes us know its strength.
You are no painted barge, fit for a day
When winds are light and all the sea is smooth ;
You will come back to us—I know you will—
Stronger in character for all this strain ;
Ours is the loss,—how we shall miss you here,
With your gay sallies, your light-hearted jests !

Otho. Thanks : I shall miss you too—how much—
how much !

No more of this ; what must be, must be,—so
Farewell, Britannicus ; pray you we meet
Some day or other here again in Rome.

Brit. Be sure we shall,—put a good face on it.

Otho. I will—I do. Bah ! what a fool man is !
One word before we part ; keep in the shade ;
Thwart not the powers that be ; avoid the path
That Nero treads, and see you waken not
His least suspicion,—wrestle not with him.

Brit. I have no cause,—I covet not his power.

All that I covet from him is his love.

Otho. His *love!* *His* love! You almost make me smile.

Brit. I fear he does not love me overmuch.

Otho. Go and tame flies, but seek not Nero's love.
Love you? There's nothing on this earth he loves
Save his dear self. All that I hope for is
You may not rouse his fear!

Brit. What! fear of me?

Why, what am I that he should fear me?

Otho. You?

The son of Claudius, emperor by right.

Brit. I would not be the emperor if I could,
And that he knows.

Otho. Look that his mother, then,
Rouse not this fear within him. Look to it.

Brit. These are vain shadows.

Otho. Let us hope they are :
But keep my counsel. Well, Britannicus,
Embrace me,—so. Farewell—a long farewell!

Brit. Farewell! and may you soon return to us.

SCENE III.—*Poppæa's house.*

POPPÆA and NERO.

Nero. You love me not, Poppæa. Now, at least,
Since Otho's gone, you might avow your love,
If any love you bear me. Yet in vain
I plead to you. Speak,—say to me, I love!

Pop. Poor Otho! He is gone indeed—and why?
What was his fault, that you must banish him?

Nero. Ah, then, you wish him back?

Pop. I pity him!
Who would not pity him that had a heart?
What was his crime? The crime of loving me.

Nero. 'Twas crime enough: he spoiled my life and
yours.

Pop. Not mine!

Nero. Yes, yours! This is a poor pretence:
You charming hypocrite, you loved him not.

Pop. I did; I loved him. He was ever kind
And true to me. He petted, cherished me—
Forestalled my every wish. He did not talk,

But acted ; proved his love ; made me his wife,
His friend, his equal.

Nero. Bah ! You loved him not !

Pop. I did. I loved him,—not with that wild sense
That you call love—that shatters peace, and drives
With riotous and passionate excess
Through all our thoughts : not that insatiate love
That, with a hungry madness, through our will
Roams, craving everything, content with naught.

Nero. Oh yes,—you loved him as one loves a dog,
To pat and pet ; when he's importunate,
Turn out of doors : sure, he will watch and guard.
No, faith, I do not want such love as that !

Pop. While he was with me, I at least was safe,—
No fear, until you came, prowled round the house,
And peeped at every crevice : now, indeed,
The watch-dog, as you called him, is away,
How am I better, safer, happier ?
Sometimes I wish I'd never seen your face.

Nero. Not always, do you ? Do you hate me, then ?

Pop. Were you content with that which I could give,
I should be happier ; but you ask too much.

Nero. Yes, I ask all. Yes, love, true love, craves
all!

Will not be fed with phrases, scraps, and shams,
Nor live on leavings. Those who love give all ;
They do not measure out poor, petty parts,
But gladly give their all, their very all,
And count it little !

Pop. Oh, that's what you mean
When you say, Love me ; now I understand.

Nero. Yes, I ask that ; is it too much I ask ?

Pop. More than I choose to give, at least—far more.
You ask for all ; of course, you offer all.

Nero. I do : ask anything of me, and see !

Pop. Suppose I take you at your word, and say,
Abandon all your state,—give up your crown,—
Change name and title,—wed me as your wife,—
Flee with me to some distant place—to Rhodes,
Corinth, or where you will ; there in disguise
Beyond the sight of men, beyond their hate,
Let us be happy,—where no fear can come,
No danger threaten,—all in all to each ;
What say you ? We have wealth enough to live ;

We should not starve ; and all the fret of courts
Far off, would sound to us like some soft buzz
Of insects, as we lay upon the grass
And talked and brooded on our happiness ;
What say you, Cæsar ?

Nero. Say? Of course I say
This is mere folly—as you know it is.

Pop. Oh, then, you mean by *all*, as much of all
As serves your purpose. I must give you all,
And in return you give, to use your words,
The scraps, the leavings, the poor, petty parts
That cost you nothing.

Nero. If such price you ask,
Large as it is, my love is large enough
To promise even this.

Pop. To promise—yes ;
Not to perform it : no ! These are mere words ;
But to come back to stern reality
Out of these fancies. You have stricken down
The shelter of my life, and left me now
Exposed to all the beatings of the storm.

Nero. What storm ?

Pop. You know as well as I. Thus far
You came to see me as a friend might come.
Otho was here, and Otho was your friend.
Now, the world knows that he is banished Rome.
Why is he banished? asks the world, and laughs :
Well, let them laugh ; what care I for the world
Or its injustice? 'twas your hand, not mine,
That drove him hence, against my wish—my will.
You set me here to face the taunting world,
Alone, unfriended.

Nero. Not unfriended! No.
Am I not here?

Pop. You are, and at your side
Stands Danger, looking o'er your shoulder there
Scowling a menace ; *that* I dare not face !

Nero. This is mere fancy, bred of idle fears :
Who dares to threaten her whom I protect ?

Pop. None better knows than you. Look ! there she
stands—
Your mother.

Nero. Where? Great gods, you startled me !

Pop. Ah ! Even at the phantom that I raise

You start, and tell me not to fear. Yet think !
If she stood there, and heard the words you say,
Where were we ? Listen ! no more folly now.
You tempt me to my ruin ; for, you see,
I'm nothing but a woman full of fears
And full of weakness. Leave me. Vex no more
Your wife, Octavia. Come not here to brave
Your mother, if you love me as you say.
There's danger in it every way : to me—
To you—to all ; for, while Octavia lives,
I cannot be your wife, I will not be
Your mistress, to be flung away at last
When you have tired of playing with the toy,—
No, never !

Nero. Who has put this in your head ?

Pop. No one : the whole world,—every wind that
blows !

Nero. No ! Some one told you this to frighten you ;
'Tis this has changed you. Some one has been here,—
'Tis useless to deny it. Who was it ?

Pop. Whoever warned me, warned me to my good,
Saw me in danger, and stretched out a hand

To save me ; if I take it, blame not him
For such small service.

Nero. Who's the fool that put
This nonsense in your head ? 'Twas Seneca.

Pop. And if it were, was he not right ? All this
Is worse than folly you are doing here.

Nero. Curse him ! And does he dare to meddle
thus ?

Pop. Oh, he was right ; he could not help but speak,
And all he said was just.

Nero. The meddling fool !

Pop. He but recited what was told to him.

Nero. Told him ? By whom ?

Pop. You know as well as I.

Nero. My mother.

Pop. And who else ? But she is right ;
It is unseemly, and it now should end.

Nero. Now by the gods infernal, they shall pay
Both, all of them, for this, and swiftly, too !

Pop. Wreak not your passion on Octavia,—
She never did you wrong.

Nero. You take her part !

You do it but to vex me.

Pop. No, indeed,

I pity her ; and you should pity her.

Nero. What ! Am I, then, a boy that cannot move
But as my mother bids me ? Ay, indeed,
Go to Octavia ! Long enough she's weighed
A clog upon me : time to fling her off.
Off with her ! and then you shall be my wife.

Pop. I ? Never ! No ! she shall not weep for me.
And not for that alone, though that's enough,
But that I fear your cruel mother's rage.
Why, she would snatch me from your very arms
And fling me out like offal to the dogs !
No ! Peace, life ; leave me these. I ask no more.
Yes ! Leave me, Nero, in the shadow here,
For in the sun all sorts of dangers swarm.
Your mother,—ah ! I think you know her not.
All have gone down before her who opposed,
Nor only me—poor, idle, timorous me—
She'd sweep away ; but were *you* in her path,
Even you she'd shatter like a broken gourd.
Oh, trust me, Nero, and withdraw in time !

Trust me, dear Nero ; give me up at once !

Nero. I give you up !—I'll thrust them all to hell !

Pop. You cannot help it, Nero—you must yield.

Nero. Yield ? Never—never ! Give you up ? No, no !

Pop. Oh, look to it—be careful how you tread :

Pitfalls are everywhere. Remember, too,

Britannicus still lives ; recall to mind

The fate of Claudius, Passienus too,

Silanus—every one that blocked her way.

Ah me ! Poor Lollia—poor Domitia—

Shall I be doomed to follow your sad fate ?

Oh spare yourself—spare me !

Nero.

You make my blood

Creep in my veins. What shall I do ? I stand

'Twixt love, and pain, and rage, all blowing wild,

Like to a staggering ship in the wide main

Beat by opposing blasts :—and yet—and yet

I will not yield. No ! I will cling to you.

Pop. And, clinging to me, kill me with your love.

Nero. No ! I will save you. I will brave them all.

You shall be mine—I swear it by the gods ;

And you shall sit beside me on the throne.

All you shall have that I can give to you.

Pop. Speak not like this ; take heed of what you do ;
We will be friends—calm friends—let that suffice.

Oh, I am tirèd of this anxious life !

'Tis peace I need, and not to climb the stairs

That lead to empire—even were you free

To lift me to them ; but you are not free.

No more of that :—Hark ! 'Tis a trumpet's clang.

They call you, Cæsar !

Nero. Must I leave you, then ?

Pop. Ay, leave me—and take heed on what you do.

Nero. I will. Now smooth your brow and clear
your eyes.

One kiss, Poppæa. Oh, my dearest love,

Smile once again ! I cannot leave you thus !

Pop. Tyrant, take heed ! Be not so violent.

Nay—set me free, I say.

Nero. Not till you say

You love me—say, I love you.

Pop. Love you—no !

See how you've torn my dress—you tiger, you !

I am afraid of you.

Nero. Afraid of me !

I would not harm your little finger, love,
For all that Rome contains.

Pop. Go—go away !

You men are all alike : a little while
You love, and with wild violence, and then—
Puff ! all is over. For a little month
If one is lucky, love is in its flower ;
And then it fades and stinks—stinks all the more
Because it was so sweet in its fresh bloom.

Nero. But yours will never fade. I never tire
Of looking into those sweet eyes of yours.

Pop. See, Nero, all these pretty things you've said
So many a time, you know them all by heart.
Confess, you've said the same words o'er and o'er
To Acte, to Octavia, and who knows
How many another ?

Nero. To Octavia—no !—

Never !—nor yet to Acte.

Pop. Yes, you have !—

At least to Acte.

Nero. Jealous—on my word !

Pop. Jealous? I jealous? What a fool you are!
Go to her. Try me: do you think I'd snap
My finger to recall you? No, not I!

Nero. Oh yes, you would! For all you choose to
feign
You'd call me back; and I should rush to you
And cry—Poppæa, here I am again!
For oh, I love you—love you—love you so,
That all the world, when you're away, is black!
And when you're with me, joyous, living, fresh
As morning spring-time when the violets come!

Pop. That's some old song of yours; you wrote it
first
For your—who was it? The first time you loved—
Acte—Octavia—or whom?

Nero. Ah, yes!
Octavia, indeed!

Pop. Well, let it then
Be Acte: names are nothing. “Acte, love,”
So went it first, “my darling, joy of life,
My spring-time violet, my morning-flower,
What were the world to me deprived of thee?”

Nero. No more of that.

Pop. "What were the world to me?"

Nero. Do you not hear me? Peace, I say!

Pop. Ah me!

How fierce you look! Will nothing serve but death?

Quick—strike then with your dagger to my heart!

Nero. There's no heart there; and for that taunting face,

That taunting smile, they're made to drive me mad.

Why do you thus provoke me?

Pop. I provoke?

It is the truth provokes you, and not I.

But hark!—again that trumpet. Leave me now.

Forget me.

Nero. Never!

Pop. Go at once.

Nero. One kiss,

And so farewell, until we meet again;

Till then one day will seem a century.

Pop. Come not again until the clouds are passed.

Nero. Keep your heart light, the clouds will pass away.

Pop. Farewell to you; I pray the gods they may.

SCENE IV.—*Imperial Palace.*

TIGELLINUS, FENIUS RUFUS, PETRONIUS ARBITER.

Tigel. Who has seen Nero? How is he to-day?

Ruf. I have not seen him since the early morn.

Petr. How was he then?

Ruf. Short, sharp, and out of sorts.

Petr. He drank too much last night—he supped
with you,

And is not yet himself; and as for me,

I laid abed all yesterday, and still

My head's not right: we drank so all of us.

Ruf. Who could refrain? What wines! what meats!

I swear

Nothing in Rome since old Lucullus' time

Was sumptuous as your banquet—not even that,

The famous one in the Apollo Hall,

That cost some thirty thousand, as they say.

Tigel. I'm glad it pleased you.

Ruf. Pleased me! On my soul

Who was not pleased must have been hard to please.

A splendid house ; gay gardens ; coloured lights
Hanging among the trees like golden fruits ;
Soft music, just enough to stir the nerves,
Not drown the voices ; clouds of dancing shapes,
Half naked, with their floating scarfs and hair ;
The clash of swords—ay, and blood, too—to whet
The jaded sense : and while we laughed and drank
The gods themselves might then have envied us !
Then, statues gleaming down the pillared halls,
And living nymphs with bared and rosy limbs.
And ebon slaves with golden glittering rings
Clanging on neck and ankles as they moved.
By heaven ! it seemed like an enchanted place.

Tigel. I hope the Emperor was pleased as well.

Petr. Ay, that he was ! Ye gods ! he scarce could let
The singers sing or the musicians play.
But he must lead them, staggering up and down,
Plucking their flutes away to play himself.
Then singing, dancing, till he tumbled prone
On the cold floor that slipped beneath his feet.

Tigel. By Jove ! I feared at first his head was cut,
Until I saw 'twas but a splash of wine,

Not blood, upon his forehead. How he laughed!

Ruf. "Here, take this flute," he cried—"I've broken it;
And there's for you instead." With that he snatched
A golden vase, all chased with living forms.
Greek, was it not? and worth, God knows how much!
And threw it to him. Tigellinus here
Laughed and applauded him.

Tigel. Why should I not?
It was so like him—such a sudden whim!

Petr. A whim, indeed! A pretty costly whim!
Lucky for you he did not take them all,
And give to every singer there a cup.

Tigel. He's a wild creature—you can never count
On what he'll do, and that's what tickles me.
I always watch him—he's such fun, you know:
All others have some limits, but he none.
He might have killed the player,—'twas a chance
He did not. Did you see that fellow's face?
'Twas ghastly white: his legs shook under him
When he saw Nero fall. I'll swear he thought
His hour was come.

Petr. I' faith, I thought it was!

Tigel. Well, then, to your surprise, and mine as well,
He flung him that rich cup. The fellow grinned,
But trembled still. I laughed as I should die.

Petr. One of your Thracians got an awful slash
Over his shoulder. Did he die of it?

Tigel. I have not heard.

Petr. What if he did, the slave!

Ruf. Nothing. I just was curious, for he looked
Like a fresh hand.

Tigel. I know not who he was.

Petr. Where vanished Epicharis? She slipped out
Just in the height of all the gaiety.

Ruf. I know not. Tigellinus knows, perhaps.

Tigel. Not I. I sought her everywhere in vain.

Ruf. I saw a figure that resembled hers
Run down the alley near the summer-house,
But, rushing after her, I only met
Piso and Flavius, who had seen her not.

Tigel. Piso and Flavius?

Ruf. Ay, and going on
I found the bodies of two soldiers there
Near the pavilion, where I thought she ran.

Tigel. That's very strange.

Ruf. I thought it strange myself.

Petr. Well! Shall we saunter down the Forum?

Come!

No use to wait—the day is going by.

Tigel. Yes, I'm agreed. Where do you sup to-night?
Let's sup together. Come to me.

Petr. No, no!

Come all to me!

Ruf. The time?

Petr. At the twelfth hour.

Tigel. Come, let us go, for Nero will not come.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE V.

Enter NERO and Attendants.

Nero. Why, here is no one! Wherefore, ye base curs,
Said you that Otho, Tigellinus, Pallas,
Were waiting here?

Attend. 'Tis but a moment since

They stood here, asking after you.

Nero. You lie!

Attend. Indeed, most potent Cæsar!

Nero. Off with you!

No words.

Attend. Your pardon, Cæsar,—you were right.

Nero. Again you lie, I say, for they were here;
Here is a bracelet Tigellinus wears,
Dropped by him here. Why stand you staring thus?
When did they go,—where are they gone? Speak,
slave!

Attend. I know not, Cæsar.

Nero. Gods! what *do* you know?
Out of my sight! Off with you! Curse you all!—
Seek them, and bring them here.

Attend. Great Cæsar, if—

Nero. If me no ifs. Be off and bring them here,
Or you shall answer for it with your head.

[*Excunt Attendants.*]

Nero (after a pause). No—I'll not wait for them.

I'll go and find

Poppæa. Ho ! I say. Litter and train,
Now in the instant. Quick !

Enter AGRIPPINA.

Agrip. Litter and train !

So you go forth, my Nero. May I ask
Whither you go so early in the day ?

Nero. To see Poppæa.

Agrip. See Poppæa ! Ah !

I thought as much—

Nero. Indeed !

Agrip. How many hours

Since you last saw her ?

Nero. What ?

Agrip. Can you not live

One day without her ?

Nero. No !

Agrip. You're always there !

Nero. And if I am——

Agrip. 'Tis time that this should cease.

Nero. Ah !

Agrip. Yes ! Look on your tablets that you
dropped.

Look at this letter writ by you to her.

Look! Every day—Poppæa! This must cease.

Nero. It will not cease.

Agrip. I say it will, and shall!

Nero. Shall? By the gods, this is indeed too much!

Shall! Look you, mother, I will brook no shalls.

I'm in no humour to be lectured now.

Agrip. Nor now, nor any time. You neither heed
My counsel nor commands.

Nero. I'm not a boy

To take commands from you nor any one,

And once for all I say, leave me alone,

Or you will rue it.

Agrip. What! ungrateful boy!

And is it come to this? You threaten me!

Me, who have toiled, and moiled, and wrought, and
thought,

Spending my life for you, and only you—

Hear him, ye gods, this boy here, threatens me

His mother! But—beware!

Nero. Beware of what?

Think you to frighten me by your loud voice?

Am I not master here ?

Agrip. Master, indeed !

Why, you poor, foolish boy, I tell you now
 You could not hold your place a single hour
 Against my will—nay, more, unpropped by me,
 You'd crumble by yourself. Be wise in time ;
 Take heed of what I counsel ; 'tis not much
 I ask, advise, pray—since you scorn commands,
 For your own sake, I pray.

Nero. I'm in no mood

For preaching now. Nay, let me pass, I say !

Agrip. Where do you go ?

Nero. Have you forgot ? I said

I go to see Poppæa.

Agrip. You will not !

Nero. Ay, so you said before,—but still I go !

Agrip. Go, if you dare, but hear before you go—

Bid your Poppæa (when within her arms
 You lie, and, feeding on her silly face,
 Gloze her with pretty words) remember me !
 Just whisper Lollia's name, and say to her
 Domitia greets her ; 'twill, I think, suffice

To end her kisses.

Nero. Ah ! you threaten her !

Think you that you alone can bend the world

To all your wishes !

Agrip. Nay, I will not boast :

The end proves all things.

Nero. Two at any game,

You know, can play.

Agrip. And one as surely lose !

Give up Poppæa, or her silly face

Will cost to her her life, to you your crown.

Why, you yourself, within a brief month's space,

Will fling her off, and then, too late, may see

What you have lost. Ah ! she would take my place,

And I must crawl before her and beseech,

And you and she will turn me out of doors,

And I shall creep away, and weep, and wail,

Like some sick girl : " Oh, Nero, take me back !—

Pardon, most fair Poppæa,—crush me not,—

Give me the little crusts you throw away,—

I am his mother,—only that, you know,—

Don't let me starve !"—and she will raise me up,

Perhaps, if so she please, and let me live.

Nero. This is sheer folly.

Agrip.

Ah ! I know the game.

Great heavens ! you little know me if you think

That I will yield my place to any one.

Give her up, Nero.

Nero. No ! I tell you, no !

Agrip. No ? You defy me then ?—So be it.—Still

I warn you—pause, reflect ; force not my hand

To do an act abhorrent to my heart.

Nero. What can you do ?

Agrip.

Do ? Do ? Why, sim-

ply this :

Britannicus is there—whom from his throne

I thrust for you,—still lives—the rightful heir.

Say,—do you hear me ? Lives ! The rightful heir.

Defy me, and I'll take him by the hand,

And bear him with me to the camp ; cry out,

“ Behold the real emperor in this boy—

This noble boy, whom no foul vices stain !

Will you, then, grovel under Nero's rule,

While here the imperial heir, this gentle youth,

Calls you to place him on his father's throne?"

What could you do to ward away this blow?

Sing them a song? Go caper in a dance?

Fall in a rage? Get drunk? or run and hide

Your silly head in your Poppæa's lap?

Nero. You would not do it.

Agrip. Ay, indeed, 'twere hard,

After the toil of thought, the skill of art,

That I have given for you; the sleepless nights

Spent for you, and the busy anxious days,

To ruin all the fabric I have reared:

But I would do it, ere I bent my knee

To any rival on the throne, much less

To that Poppæa. Count on me for that.

Ay, I would strike the blow even did my head

Lie under it—would strike the temple down

That I had reared, though it should crush me too.

Nero. I fear you would.

Agrip. What do I ask of you?

Nothing,—a little gratitude at most.

What do I ask that is not for your good?

To yield a day's whim for a foolish girl;

To do your duty ; not to waste your days
In rioting, and drunkenness, and vice.

Nero. Mother, enough : I'll think on what you say.

Agrip. Why, that's my boy at last : think over it.
I counsel for your good, be sure of that.
Why have I dispossessed Britannicus ?
Why have I dared and done, except for you ?
Think on it,—act on it.

Nero. Trust me. I will.
I'll think on what you have said, nor only think,
But act upon it, too.

Agrip. Give me your word,
You will not see Poppæa.

Nero. I have said
I'll think upon it.

Agrip. Nero ! if your face
Be any index of your mind, I see
Fierce insurrection in your every thought.

Nero. I'll not be driven more : enough of this !
I've heard your threats,—you've struck the gods in
well—
And if they do not sting, 'tis not your fault.

Agrip. You mean rebellion ! Well, rebel, and then,

When foiled and bleeding in the dusty ring,
Rise up with broken arms and shield reversed,
And flee to Burrhus or to Seneca.
Flee to your Tigellinus,—ask the aid
Of your Petronius; pray your friends to draw
The avenging sword. If any of the crew
That dance, and sing, and revel all night long,
Refuse to pluck the flowers from off their brows,
Refuse to start up from their mad debauch,
Turn round and face the facts yourself, and try
If any manhood in your blood there be!
I tell you, if you measure swords with me,
You measure them alone. At my first sign,
Those friends of yours would scatter as men fly
Forth from a tottering house when the earth quakes!
Look you!—you've not a friend of all the crew
That counts your life as much as one debauch.
Whatever comes—remember this—at last,
When your day comes,—and there's a day for all,—
You'll find yourself alone, with one weak hand,
Your own, against a myriad bloody blades.
Now—go to your Poppæa, if you will!

[*Exit* AGRIPPINA.]

Nero. Poppæa ! No ! I will not give her up.
No ! Come what will, I will not give her up.
Britannicus ;—ah ! that's the game she plays.
Well, my Britannicus, look to it, then !
The next time, if Locusta fails me not,
I'll make all sure. You shall not sing again
Andromache's grand wail on fallen Troy,
As on that Saturnalian night, to wake
A maudlin pity for you in the guests !
No, no ! The time has come to end all that.
Not to Poppæa—to Locusta now !
Oh, my dear mother, thanks ; you've shown your hand.
I'll be before you. To Locusta now !

SCENE VI.—*Banquet, Imperial Palace.*

AGRIPPINA, OCTAVIA, NERO, BRITANNICUS, SENECA,
BURRHUS, PALLAS, &c.

Nero. This honey has the very breath of flowers.
Here, try it, Seneca.

Sen. Thanks, Cæsar, thanks—

'Tis excellent.

Nero. You say in Corsica

'Tis not so sweet ?

Sen. It has an acrid taste.

The bees feed on the box-flower, and it spoils

The honey's flavour.

Oct. Is it pleasant there ?

Sen. Not to an exile ; 'tis a barbarous land,

Fruitless, with ne'er an olive on its slopes,

Rugged and bare.

Oct. You were not happy there ?

Sen. There is no land wherein man cannot dwell,

And lift his eyes to heaven ; and yet, in truth,

I was not happy there.

Brit. But still, you say,

It is the mind alone makes happiness,

Not place,—and so say all philosophers.

Sen. True,—but I still regretted friends and Rome.

And there were moments when a longing pain

Came over me for all that I had left,

All I had loved.

Agrip. Well, that is over now.

Sen. Thanks to your grace.

Brit. To live without a friend
Is sad enough—is't not, Octavia?

Oct. 'Tis love alone that makes life's happiness;
Exile is cruel, but the worst of fates
Is to be friendless; as for solitude,
I sometimes think 'twould have a sweeter charm
Than all the noise and fret of public life.

Brit. Ay, for a time; yet not, I think, for long.
Life has its duties, and the bright sword rusts
Too long hid in the scabbard: as for me,
Rome, friends, and life!

Nero. Burrhus, what news in Rome?

Bur. None, Cæsar.

Pal. Still they talk of your last feat:
How in the amphitheatre you won
The crown for singing.

Nero. They still talk of that?

Pal. Ay, that they do—how perfect was your voice!
How clear and pure the expression of the piece!
Though you are Cæsar, you have put to shame

Our best of singers : they acknowledge it.

Nero. Ah, is it so ? And yet, I think, my harp
Not far behind my singing.

Pal. No, in faith—
Abreast of it ; nor yet a jot behind
Your chariot-driving : with what skill and ease
You guide those fierce steeds at their fullest speed !

Nero. You flatter, Pallas.

Pal. On my faith, not I !

Nero. Anotus—here—give me to drink, I say.

[ANOTUS pours out the wine : NERO whis-
pers to him leaning back.]

Have you that potion ready as I bid ?

Anot. Cæsar, I have.

Nero. Mind you confound it not
Among the vases : take good heed of that !
Wait near Britannicus—let no one else
Fill up his cup.

Anot. Cæsar, I understand.

Agrip. Hark, how it storms ! That sharp, blue,
vivid flash

Half-blinded me. And listen how it growls,

That heavy trampling thunder overhead !
 Think you it struck the palace ?

Oct. Mighty Jove !

I pray it did not.

Nero. Little fear of that.

Brit. How the poor wretches must be drenched to-
 night !

Cowering beneath the hedges and on plains,
 While the fierce lightnings plunge from heaven at them.

Nero. Jove's lightnings need a higher prey than
 those.

Oct. Happy the low, who do not fear their bolts !

Nero. Why ? Do you fear them ?

Oct. Yes ; they make me quake.

Agrip. Nay, never fear : lean closer here to me.

Nero. Ho, music ! just to drown this noise—more
 lights

To hide these flashes ! So, they talk of me
 And of my singing still ?

Pal. Ay, that they do !

Nero. I mean some time to try my hand in Greece
 At the Olympian games, and win a crown.

Agrip. A crown—for what? For singing? or for
speech?

Brit. Give me to drink—ho! Fill my cup, I say.

Nero. Thank you, good mother.

[ANOTUS *pours out to* BRITANNICUS, *who
puts the cup to his lips.*

Brit. 'Tis too hot; here, pour

A drop of water in to temper it.

[ANOTUS *pours from another vase.* BRITANNICUS *drinks, then instantly falls back speechless and gasping.* All the guests start up.

Agrip. Help! help! great Jove!—Britannicus is ill!

Speak—speak, Britannicus!—what ails you, boy?

Speak!—ah, he cannot speak! Octavia!

Pallas! here, help me! Where is Xenophon?

Fly for him—some one. Oh, great Jove! quick!
quick!

Nero. Sit, friends—'tis but a fit: he's often thus;

A falling sickness—what physicians call

An epilepsy: sit—there is no need

Of all this pother. Lift him from his couch.

Carry him out ; he'll soon be well again.

He often suffers from such fits as this.

Poor boy ! Sit—sit—my friends, and let not this

Disturb your mirth : 'tis nothing.

[*They lift BRITANNICUS, and carry him out.*

Speak to them,

Octavia ! (*Grasps her by the arm, and whispers.*) Speak,

and don't sit trembling thus,

Pale as a ghost !

Oct. I cannot.

Nero. Speak to them, I say !

Oct. I hope, my friends, it is as Cæsar says,

A fit. Oh Nero, let me go—I'm ill !

Nero. No, by the infernal gods, you shall not go !

[*Guests sit down again.*

Agrip. With your permission, Cæsar, I'll retire
To tend your brother.

Nero. Go, I pray you, go !

[*AGRIPPINA walks out.*

Bur. I think, 'twere better we should go as well,
Craving my Cæsar's pardon. Vain it were,
After this painful scene, to think of mirth.

Nero. Go, if you will ; but I assure you all
'Tis nothing : go, and order vows for him,
That our dear brother soon be well again.

[*The guests go out.*]

Fool ! Idiot ! To your room ! Away, I say !
Your silly, ghastly face makes me half-sick.

Oct. Oh Nero ! [She goes out.]

Nero. So, Locusta failed me not.

[*Re-enter AGRIPPINA.*]

How is Britannicus ?

Agrip. Dead.

Nero. Are you sure ?

Agrip. Go, see his corpse there, and assure yourself.

Nero. Dead ? Poor Britannicus !—who might have sat
Upon this very throne instead of me.

Agrip. Nero !

Nero. My mother.

Agrip. Ah, I understand !

Nero. Take him, and make him emperor if you can.

END OF ACT II.

ACT III.

SCENE I.—*Imperial Palace.*

AGRIPPINA.

Agrip. I must retrace my steps. Fool that I was
 To think by threats to rule him. Now, indeed,
 Britannicus is dead, that way is closed.
 So, you and I, Poppæa, for his love
 Must struggle : I am older—I have passed
 My seventh lustrum ;—still I am in my prime,
 And youths love women older than themselves.
 No other course is left ; and if that fails
 All fails, and I must yield. I will not yield !
 What ! *I* sink down into the second place !
 Still—still the contest with Poppæa's hard.
 Yes, though I hate her—*hate* her—I'm not blind ;

For she is fair, young, dowered with dangerous gifts,
And capable to use them. No more threats !
I cannot drive him. I must lure him back
By arts of love. That is my only course.

Enter NERO.

How fares my Cæsar now,—my pride, my joy ?

Nero. Well, mother—well !

Agrip. Let me arrange your
dress ;

'Tis in disorder ; there, that's better now.

Lie on this couch, and I will place me here,

And let us have a little hour of talk.

You are not going out ?

Nero. No, mother, no.

Agrip. I'm glad to see your face so calm and
bright,

Without that trouble on your brow that late

So clouded it. Ah well, all's right at last.

Yes ! Rome already has forgotten all.

Forgetting is forgiving. Now, indeed,

Your seat is safe ; there's none to threaten it.

Nero. No one but you.

Agrip. Oh, Nero, speak not thus !
Forgive me, if, in jealousy and fear
Lest others snatched your love away from me,
I yielded to a moment's anger. Say
That you forgive me. Nay, remember not
My foolish words, for who has loved so long,
So steadily as I ?

Nero. I would I knew
What now you purpose.

Agrip. Purpose? Only this,
To keep your love. Without you, what were life?
And yet I am so weak.

Nero. Who, then, is strong?
Mother, I would you always wore the face
That now you wear, for it becomes you well.
Why will you ever thwart me—stand between
My wishes and my acts ?

Agrip. Oh, I was wrong.
Nay, turn not from me—for I need your love—
Must have it. Once you gave me a child's love,
And that was dear to me—but that is past.

Nor would it now suffice—I ask for more ;
Oh ! so much more.

Nero. I do not understand.

Agrip. Not understand? Why, how else could
it be?

You are so noble, handsome, manly, strong—
What woman with a heart could look at you
And fail to love you? How much more, then, I?
Almost I could forget you are my son,
Almost could wish you were not. Then, perhaps,
You still might love me.

Nero. What?

Agrip. Oh, do not think
That love's capacity can ever die
In woman's heart ! The bloom of youth fades out.
See, it has gone from me. I am not fair
As once I was ; yet, still the power to love
Lives in me deeper—stronger far than when
I was a trivial girl. Love's feeble rill
That first slips trembling through the whispering
grass,
And plays with any flower upon its marge,

Grows deeper, stronger in its onward course,
Till, like a torrent, fierce, impetuous, wild,
It forces through all obstacles its way.
I love you, Nero. Twenty thousand girls
Could not make up such love as mine for you !
My love began when first I heard your voice—
When first a child you lay upon my breast,
And every year has only lent it strength.
Now, as you stand before me full, complete
In all your manhood, while this heart of mine
Beats for you as it never then could beat,
Say, will you throw me off? Give me your love !
Do you not see you are my all in all—
My other life—without which all I am
Is tame, and weak, and wretched? Look at me ;
Tell me you love me, Nero !

Nero.

By the gods,

If thus you ever smiled and thus you spake,
I could forget you were my mother !

Agrip.

Ah?

Nero. I could indeed.

Agrip.

Well, then, forget it.—Yes!

What matters names if I possess your love?

Oh Nero! Nero! Nero! pity me.—

Oh, more than pity me! Forget the past.

In a new life now let us spend our days!

Trust me: for none will love you, cling to you,

Joy in you, struggle for you, die for you,—

As I will!

Nero. Ah! I would this all were true!*Agrip.* True? It is true. Believe me,—trust in me.

No light girl's love can be so strong as mine!

She'll play with you, caress you, lead you on,

Make sport of you, and throw you off at last!

But I—I feel my very heart-strings now

So grapple to you, that nor life, nor death,

Nor any stroke of Fate can loose their hold!

Lean on my breast, my Nero: feel my heart

How fierce it beats,—and only beats for you!

Nero. I fear you; though within my sense you wake

Strange fancies. For, by heaven, your splendid face,

Your eyes, your lips, are fired as with a flame!

Still, still! beneath all feelings—down below—
Lurks a cold dread. I know not what to do,—
I dare not trust you.

Agrip. Oh, indeed, indeed,
You may! You must! I will not lose you thus,—
You shall be mine! Though Hades gape, you shall!
And I will bar away from you all ill.
Heed no one's words but mine,—heed no one's love,—
For mine is vast enough to drown them all!
Here on my knees, here prone before you now,
I supplicate. Oh, Nero——

Nero. Mother, rise!

Agrip. No, Nero, no, I will not rise, I say,
Until you swear you will not cast me off.

Nero. Rise, rise, I say,—I will not have you there.

Agrip. Then leave me here, or lift me up yourself!

[*He lifts her up.*]

Nero. There, there, compose yourself,—drive me not
mad.

Some one approaches,—that is Pallas' voice!

Agrip. Pallas? Then leave me!

Nero. Shall I let him in?

Agrip. No, no!—Yes! No!—Go, join him;—leave me here.

[*Exit Nero.*

Oh, I will hold him yet, despite of her!

SCENE II.—*Forum.*

PALLAS, PISO, FLAVUS.

Pal. An ugly scene it was indeed: the storm
Darting sharp flashes through the lighted hall,
That startled all to silence,—then, again,
The talk beginning.—Suddenly we heard
A gasp—the young Britannicus fell back.
All was confusion—terror;—only one
Of all was calm. 'Twas Nero. There he sat
As 'twere a thing of every day to him.
“'Tis but a fit,” he said,—“merely a fit;
Let it not interrupt the gaiety.”

Piso. I think there's not a spark of pity in him.

Flav. And what did Agrippina say and do?
Think you that she abetted the foul crime?

Pal. She? No! The terror in her face—her cries—
Showed she was guiltless.

Piso. So you think at least?

Pal. Nay, I am sure. Besides, his death to her
Was utter loss; for so long as he lived
She held a rod to frighten Cæsar with,
And make him do her bidding.

Piso. That is true.

'Twas, then, his work alone.

Pal. Of course it was.

Now that the fear is off his mind he'll sleep
More quiet; for the rabble Romans here
Have talked it out, and quite forgotten it.

Flav. Well, he has bought our silence; none of us
Are poorer for his brother's so-called fit:
Even our great philosopher, whose text
Is mercy, clemency, and all the charm
Of poverty, has had his mouth shut close.

Piso. What did he pay him?

Pul. Ask him that yourself.

Flav. The Senate, too, have had their bribe. By Jove !
That edict, with its sad laments and tears,
That Nero wrote (or Seneca for him
More likely), is enough to make one laugh,—
If one could laugh after a deed like this.

Pal. Flavus, your virtue almost makes me weep.
But here comes Lucan. He will read us now
Some noble verses—sounding forth the praise
Of our accomplished Cæsar—like to those
That he recited lately at the Games.

Piso. I'm sick of them. Come, who will go with me ?

Flav. Let us all go together.

Pal. Good ! agreed !

SCENE III.—*Poppæa's house.*

NERO *and* POPPÆA.

Nero. What shall I say or do, Poppæa ? Speak,
I will obey you.

Pop. I'll not counsel you.

Do what you will. You see it comes to this,
That you must choose between us—her or me.

Nero. That's quickly done. You, you, and only you !

Pop. You would have both hands full. That is your
way,—

And 'tis impossible.

Nero. You scarce can think

There is a moment's choice 'twixt you and her.

Pop. I know not what you wish. Here you profess
You love me. What, away from me, you say
To her or to your mother, who can tell ?

Nero. You know I love you ; that your voice, your
smile,

Your presence, are life's all-in-all to me.

I cannot live without you ; but in vain

I knock against your heart—your cold, barred heart

That will not let me in ! Caught in your toils,

I writhe and quiver like a helpless fly

Snared by a spider.

Pop. Thanks : the simile

Is kind, considerate, gracious, if not new.

Nero. I did not think of you, but of myself.

Pop. True, very true ! Why should you think of me ?

What am I that great Cæsar should take heed
Of what he does or says to one like me ?

Nero. Forgive me, dearest ! Oh, Poppæa, mine !
Heed not my stupid phrases, my wild words,—
I know not what I say ! I love you so,
That all goes wild within me,—all my thoughts
Blow here and there like loose leaves in a gale.
You must be mine ! Come life, come death to me,
You shall be mine, I say !

Pop. Cæsar, be calm !

Nero. Say that you love me !

Pop. No, I will not say

I love you. Cæsar, you've another wife !
You come to play at leisure hours with me
For selfish pastime,—as one plucks a flower
To wear it for a moment on his breast,
Then throw it down into the dusty road,
There to be trampled on by all the world !
I will not love you—will not hold you back
Even by a word. I am not sure of you !

How do I know this moment's phantasy
 That binds you to me, may not snap apart
 At passion's first sharp wrench, and I be left
 Helpless, alone, on danger's perilous steep,
 With death's abyss before me, and behind !
 I will not dare such danger. Here I lay
 Moored,—all at peace within my bay of life,
 When you came in to tempt, to lure me forth
 Into this tempest. No, I am not strong
 To brave these whirlwinds. Leave me here in peace !

Nero. You doubt me ? By what pledge, or oath, or
 act

Can I assure you ? If I cast away
 This woman that my mother made me wed,
 Will you be mine ? or is your heart so hard
 It has no pity ?

Pop. She is still your wife.

I would not do her wrong. Go back to her :
 She loves you, and I give you up to her.

Nero. Why do you fret my patience thus ? You know
 I hate her. That I cannot live with her.
 At every step she clogs me like a chain.

Pop. So you will say of me, when the first zest
Of this wild whim of love has passed away.

Nero. Never! no, never!

Pop. Never is too long :
Say for six months——

Nero. By the immortal gods!

Pop. No oaths—I like not oaths—nor promises :
'Tis only deeds are solid—not mere words :
They are blank air. They leave no trace behind,
And the same air the tongue one moment coins
To a rash promise, may be coined again
To its reverse before the words are cold.

Nero. You have small faith in me. Would to the
 gods
I hated you. You might believe me then.

Pop. Perhaps. I'd trust your hate more than your
 love.
It is a sterner passion—longer lived
And deeper rooted.

Nero. Try me, test my love :
Ask anything—no sacrifice is great
If it will only win thee for my own.

Pop. I ask for nothing. Think on what you say :
Tempt me no further—leave me now alone.

Nero. I will divorce Octavia—on my oath
I promise it—if you will be my wife.

Pop. You cannot do it even if you would.
And more, I will not, cannot, dare not wish
This sacrifice of her who never harmed
Me, you, or any one. I envy her,
I own it, she is lifted up so high ;
She is so fair and good, that in her sight
I am mere rubbish ; yet I wish her well.

Nero. Then take her place. She will be happier far,
Freed from a yoke that irks both her and me.

Pop. No ! never !

Nero. I will do it then for you !

Pop. Never ! You dare not while your mother lives.

Nero. All things I dare for you.

Pop. Oh, idle boast !

You dare not brave your mother. Even you,
Cæsar, enthroned, the master of the world,
Shrink at her lifted finger. How should I,
A weak poor woman, with no power at all

More than a reed has, bending to the blast,
Stand up against her? Yet you urge me on
To brave her. You, forsooth; you urge me on
Who in no least thing dare oppose her will.

Nero. I do; I will. She shall not rule me more.

Pop. Fine words! 'Tis lucky that she hears you not,
Or that brave tongue of yours would change its tone.

Nero. You think I am a coward.

Pop. No, not that,
Only a boy still in your leading-strings.
You look an emperor. Are you one? oh no!
My little boy must ask his dear mamma,
Shall I do this? Shall I do that? And then
Mamma says, Fie! and he begins to cry.

Nero. Poppæa!

Pop. Well!

Nero. No more of this.

Pop. Well, then,
Act like a man. Send her away from Rome;
Be your own master.

Nero. Would that she were dead.

Pop. She will not die with wishing.

Nero.

She shall go !

I will not have her longer here in Rome.

Pop. Ay ! send her forth. Break off with her at once.
Bid her change air. Tell her her health demands
Some relaxation from the cares of state.
Threaten not—quarrel not—put on the mask
Of care and kindness—but get rid of her—
Then we shall both breathe freer, you and I.
Neither are safe so long as here she lives.

Nero. So long as anywhere she lives, she plots.
Yes ! she shall go.

Pop. Heed not her honeyed words ;
Heed not her protestations of feigned love.
The serpent seeks to charm you ere it stings.
Heavens ! that last scene of hers within me moves
Scorn, pity, laughter,—admiration too—
'Twas so well acted.

Nero.

Acted ?

Pop.

Oh ! you thought

It was all real—that her tender heart
Was touched with passion for you—did you not ?

Nero. I know in all her glow she seemed to me,

Despite her age, despite of all I know,
A splendid creature.

Pop. Then go back to her :
Tell her I sent you, for I would not keep
Her lover from her.

Nero. Are you mad?

Pop. I, mad?

No! but it seems to me you are.

Nero. I say

I fear her. She's a terror to my soul :
I would to all the gods that she were dead.
She dogs my path—she spies my every act.
Go where I will, her shadow follows me.
She knows this very moment I am here,
And, knowing it, how am I sure to-night
She will not drug my cup, and over me
Tower like a fate, and triumph while I writhe.

Pop. You fear her thus, and yet you keep her here—
Here in your house, to play the spy on you—
Live with her, eat with her—ay, drink with her,
And tell me that you dread a poisoned draught.
Do I not know if this were real fear,

Not mere pretence to win me to your will,
Long, long ere this she would have joined her friends
She sent before her, Lollia and the rest.

Nero. All my schemes fail. She has some secret aid,
Some magic power that helps her to escape ;
So, when I charged her with conspiracy,
How swift she slipped away, charming the sense
Of those who should have judged her—coming forth
Out of the trial brighter than before.
Nor this alone,—Locusta played me false.

Pop. Poison ! Oh, Nero ! not a word of that !
'Tis wrong,—'tis dangerous.

Nero. I was driven to it
By very fear of her,—what could I do ?
But all was useless—she has antidotes
To every poison ; and besides—besides,
She is my mother,—though her rule be hard,
Harsh, hateful—she has thought and toiled for me.

Pop. Only for you ! indeed ? Only for you ?
Ah ! you are right, she only thought of you—
She is your mother. Well, if she's so kind,
Why do you rail and storm so—why this fear ?

Leave me, and go to her ;—no one shall say
I sought to rob you of her. Go—at once.

Nero. You drive me mad. What would you have
me do ?

Pop. I?—nothing. Do not ask me what to do.
Only it vexes me—this ebb and flow
Of ever-varying passion. Choose yourself !
I give no counsel ; you shall never say
I counselled you to any course—save this,
No crimes—no crimes, for God's sake : for the rest,
You only must decide ; and as for me,
Leave me in peace, or else these fits and starts
Of yes and no will pull down death at last
To overwhelm us both,—not me alone.
I will have nought to do with her or you :
I fear you both, and Jove knows which the most.

Nero. You do not fear me ?

Pop. Ay, indeed I do.

You'll be my ruin at the last, I know.
Not for ill-will—not wishing any harm,
But through a moment's weakness—or mere chance—
A moment's passion—some fierce sudden fit

Of madness—somehow, though I see not how,
You'll ruin me. It is my fate, I know.
And yet—and yet—fool that I am—weak fool,
I let you drag me on ; like some poor moth,
I flit about the flame, sure at the end
To shrivel me to death.

Nero.

Oh, speak not thus !

My love—my soul—what is there on this earth
So dear to me as you are? As the flower
Can know no colour hidden from the sun,
So can I know no joy deprived of you.
All else is shadow, all else weariness.
Let us no longer talk of these sad themes
That torture and harass us. See, how calm
This perfect day lies brooding over Rome !
Not a leaf stirs—and from the distant hills
The air comes sweet and mild and passionless,
Laden with odours, breathing only peace.
Smile, dear Poppæa. Smiles become that face—
Dear face, that never should look grave or sad.

Pop. Ah, Nero ! would that we could find a port
Where the world's agitation should not reach,

Where danger did not threaten—where the sky
Was ever calm without a darkening cloud
To breed its lightning on the horizon's verge :
There, we might dare be happy—there alone ;
Not here—not here. Jove knows within my heart
'Tis rest, 'tis peace, I crave. I would be friends
With all the world ; my feet are wearied here
Treading along these perilous defiles
That beetle over death,—blown by wild gusts
That tear and strain me. Oh, I long for rest.

Nero. Vex not your spirit more,—all will come right ;
We will be happy, spite of all the world ;—
At least this hour,—if only for an hour,—
Let us enjoy what life has given us,
Nor cast our looks into the Future dim :
Only the present moment can we own ;
Come—shall we have some music—will you sing ?

Pop. I have no spirits.

Nero. Come, love, sing to me.

Pop. No ; you shall play me something on the
lyre :

Yes—that will soothe me—while I lie and hear.

Nothing so dear as music. Its pure voice
Smooths out our agitations,—calms our griefs,
Quickens our gladness,—lends to love itself
A sweeter tone in which to tell his tale ;
'Tis to our words what perfume is to flowers,
Or sunset to the rudest roughest forms,
Enchanting all things with its subtle power :
Yes, let us lay one moment with its spell
These torturing themes, which tear the very heart.
Come with me. What a tangled skein life is !
[*Exeunt.*

SCENE IV.—*Villa of Agrippina.*

AGRIPPINA *and* ACERRONIA.

Agrip. Well, Acerronia, I have lost, you see ;
Poppæa triumphs on us. Here am I
Shelved, driven forth from Rome and all its life,
Here prisoned—for a prison, save in name,
Is this dull place. How tedious, dreary, stale,

Is this blank life—nothing to do or be !

Acer. Be patient, lady. Time and use will take
The edge from its discomfort.

Agrip. Time will bring
The chance for my revenge. To that alone
My hopes look forward ; were it not for that,
I'd end it all at once ; better be dead
Than rot inactive.

Acer. Lady, say not so !
Here you are safe at least—no danger here
Threatens your life. This calm and peaceful place
Will soothe your thoughts.

Agrip. No, 'tis the very peace
That drives me mad. 'Tis danger that I court.
Poor comfort to the soldier to be told
That peace is not so dangerous as war.
'Tis war he covets—thence his glory comes,—
The stir, the struggle, even the defeat
Is better than the tedious, drowsy life
Where stupid peace sweats, sleeps, and vegetates.

Acer. Count this seclusion, then, some quiet port,
Wherein you may repair your shattered strength ;

Fitting yourself, when comes the day, the chance,
For the new battle.

Agrip. Ay, there's comfort there !

Poor comfort ; but the best that now remains.

How long have we been here ?

Acer. 'Tis but a month.

Agrip. It seems an age ;—only a little month !

I would at least that Pallas were with me.

But no,—his cruel hand tears all away ;

Not even my German soldiers he has left

To me, an empress, and his mother too.

Acer. Distract your mind from it. The evening's cool ;

Let me persuade you through the terraced walks

To stroll a space. See, o'er the distant slopes,

The purple splendour of the dying day !

How fair it is ! Hark, there, the throbbing song

Of the hid nightingale amid the trees.

Come, breathe the outer air—I pray you, do.

Agrip. I have no heart for it, yet I will go.

[*Goes towards the terrace.*]

Whose are those galleys rounding yonder point,

Oaring their way along the tranquil sea ?

Look, how the sunlight flashes on their gold !

Acer. They must be part of Anicetus' fleet,
That, as I hear, are off Misenum now,
Rounding the cape to Baiæ.

Agrip. Do they bear
The Admiral to Cæsar? Here am I,
And I know nothing—nothing—while the world
Goes on without me,—takes no heed of me,—
Passes me by the same as I were dead.

Acer. 'Tis a fair sight. How evenly the oars
Now rise, now dip, and now an eagle tall,
And now a shield flings flashing back the sun !

Agrip. What scheme's afoot? Great Heaven, that I
should rot

In ignorance here while all the world's astir
In busy life ! Oh, Cæsar, send for me !
Ay, though it be to kill me. Better death
Than this blank monotone of dreary life.

Acer. Think not so sadly on it.

Agrip. I could tear
My very heart out. Do not think of it?
Why, what then should I think on? Do you dream

I can wipe out all memory of the past,
All longings, cravings, after what I've lost?
Not think of it? I think of nothing else.

Acer. I would that I could help you.

Agrip.

Come away,

No one can help me—none but one, and he,
Cæsar, who will not. Come, I say, away.

SCENE V.—*Cæsar's Villa at Bauli.*

NERO, ANICETUS.

Nero. What's to be done? say, Anicetus, say.
I have but clipped her wings; they'll grow again.

Ani. Lives she not quiet in her villa now?
What need do more than keep her safely there?

Nero. I cannot be at rest: a constant fear
Of what she's plotting now possesses me.
I seem to see her everywhere. I start
Out of wild dreams thinking I hear her call.

Her restless spirit, having nought to do,
Is building, building, ever in the dark.
By heavens, I fear her more away from me
Than when she's with me !

Ani. 'Tis an idle fear.

Nero. 'Tis not. There is no rest for me so long
As she is living—none by day or night.
She haunts me ever like an evil dream ;
I think she has some dark infernal skill
Of magic power with which she tortures me.
I will not bear it longer—better here
Where we can watch her than so far away.
She might be managed here, perhaps, who knows ?

Ani. Send for her here, then. Where she is, her
friends

Keep guard upon her safety. There's no chance
Of any accident.

Nero. No chance indeed !

But as it is, I draw not one free breath.
What's to be done ? say, Anicetus, say.

Ani. What do you wish ? Speak openly to me ;
Tell me your wish, and I will see it done.

Nero. I wish that she were dead.

Ani. Then let her die.

Nero. Let her—ay, surely—but she does not seem
To think of dying.

Ani. We must think of it.

Would she come here if you should send for her?

Nero. Who knows? Our open rupture might perhaps
Lead her to think the message were a snare.

Ani. Ask, then, her pardon. Say you long for her ;
Things go at random now that she's away.
Say that you wish the world to see and know
That son and mother are no enemies.

Nero. And then?

Ani. Send then a galley for her use.
If she accept, it shall be trimmed and decked
Fit for an empress. From its prow and poop
Let silken streamers flutter. Let her couch
'Neath a pavilion cloth of gold be spread
With soft embroidered cushions—while the oars,
All tipped with gold, keep even rise and fall,
To music's low recurrent pulse, and bear
The empress on to Cæsar. Nothing stint :

Let all be splendid to allure her here.

Nero. Well, well,—and then?

Ani. Scarce is the half-way
made

From cape to cape across the open bay,
When, sudden—for one cannot build so strong
As to defy all chance of accident—
Suppose, for instance, that some plank gave way,
And the high-loaded canopy crashed down.

Nero. I see ! I see ! Such accident, indeed,
Spite of our wish, might happen. Let us trust
It never will ; but should it, we might lose
Our royal mother, Anicetus—eh ?

Ani. One cannot guard against all accidents.

Nero. See then the galley be well built. Take heed
How 'tis constructed.

Ani. Ay, leave that to me.

Nero. Do it, my Anicetus—do it quick ;
Then I shall rest in peace.

Ani. Leave all to me.

Nero. I will, I will. Ah, you're my friend indeed !
Go, go ! and be my messenger to her.

SCENE VI.—*Villa of Agrippina.*

AGRIPPINA, ACERRONIA, ANICETUS, AGERINUS,
and Attendants.

Ager. Madam, the Admiral Anicetus craves
Admission to your presence.

Agrip. Show him in.

ANICETUS *is introduced.*

Agrip. Sir, you are welcome.

Ani. Health to you and thanks,
Most noble lady.

Agrip. To what happy chance,
Good admiral, do I this visit owe?
But welcome,—and whence come you?

Ani. I am charged,
Most noble lady, with the greetings kind
Of your own son, our Cæsar, who is now
At Bauli; he bids me say to you,
With the best phrase that lies at my command,
(Your pardon if a sailor's rough tongue want

The skill to speak my message as I should)—
He bids me say it grieves his heart to think
On what is past, and throws him at your feet
To crave your pardon as a loving son.
It ill beseems that any cloud should be
’Twiixt you and him, or shadow of distrust.
And for himself, he longs to see your face,
Now hid from him so long, and ask your aid
In counsel as to many state affairs.
And, after all, these are his very words,
“Friends may be many, mothers only one.”
And so he bids me beg your company
At Baiæ, where the world again may see
That no estrangement more between you lies.

Agrip. Give him my greeting and my love, and say
I will attend him. Every wish of his
Is law to me, and ever was to me.

Ani. Madam, my message is not wholly done.
Hoping you might accede to his desire,
He bade me fit a galley to your use
That should convey you hence along the shore
To Baiæ, where, in anxious hope and love,

He waits you. There, in yonder port, it lies.
If aught it lack befitting to your rank,
The fault is mine, not his. He bade me spare
No pains to make it fitting, and I fain
Would hope I may not utterly have failed.

Agrip. If it be sound, I have no other need ;
I will accept this kindly wish of his,
And thank your zeal as well. When, at what place,
Does he await me ?

Ani. He's at Bauli
To celebrate the sacred festival
In honour of Minerva. There the crowd
For many a mile around has flocked to join
The holy rites and see the festal games.
He would implore your presence at these rites,
That all the world might look on you and see
The love and reverence he fain would show
To you, his mother.

Agrip. When does he desire
My presence ?

Ani. Even when you will—nay, now ;
The sooner you depart to meet him there

The better it will please him ; I am here
At your command.

Agrip. Nay, then I'll go at once !

I have no wish to tarry here—and yet
I do not like the sea,—and now I think
The wind is rising——

Ani. Look how calm it is !

Agrip. It looks so ; yet my head is apt to feel
The slightest motion. No ; a thousand thanks
For all your kindness, I will rather take
My litter and proceed along the shore.

Ani. I can assure you——

Agrip. Oh, good admiral,
Your seasoned head would think it always calm
When mine would turn. Pray do not laugh at me.

Ani. Most noble lady, look ! the sea is still
And steady as the floor on which we stand.

Agrip. No ; we shall be in sight of you the while
We skirt the shore, and it is better thus :
Order my litter, Anicetus, now—
Make ready, friends, we will be off at once.

[*Exeunt all but ANICETUS.*

Ani. Ah! she suspects. This time the scheme
breaks down.

SCENE VII.—*Baiæ—Emperor's Villa—Bauli.*

NERO, AGRIPPINA, SENECA, ACERRONIA, ANICETUS,
BURRHUS, AGERINUS, CREPEREIUS, GALLUS, *and*
others.

Nero. Welcome, dear mother—welcome best of
friends!

It seems a weary year since last we met.

Agrip. If so it seem to you—to me it seems
A weary century.

Nero. Ah! now indeed
We can be happy as of yore we were.
All shadows gone, clear sunshine over all;
And are you well? You look a little pale:
I hope this journey has not overtaxed
Your bodily strength. Why came you on by land?

I sent a galley for you. How is this ?
Why, Anicetus, was the craft so poor,
So ill-conditioned, that it pleased her not ?
Look to it, sir ; did I not bid you fit
The choicest galley in the fleet for her ?

Agrip. Oh no, my Cæsar ! 'twas not that indeed ;
It was a sumptuous galley,—wanted nought
For splendour. Our kind Anicetus here
Obeyed your orders in a regal way.
It was a foolish woman's whim of mine ;
Forgive me for it,—but I fear the sea,
Lest it should turn my head with dizzy qualms.

Nero. Here from the terrace we looked out for you,
Gazing upon the galley that we thought
Was bearing you to us. I only fear
Your journey tires you,—it was long and hot,—
Would you repose ?

Agrip. Oh no, I am not tired.

Nero. Come with us, then, into the atrium,
'Tis cooler there. Lean on me ; I am glad
To have you thus beside me once again.

[*They walk aside ; he speaks low to her.*

You have forgiven me,—I hope,—I pray.

Agrip. Ah, Nero, my dear son! a mother's heart
Can never keep a rancour 'gainst a son.

Forgive me, too,—I was too quick,—too harsh;
I have repented. Give me back your heart.

Nero. 'Tis yours, my dearest mother, wholly yours!

Agrip. You know not how I suffered there alone,—
My heart, my hopes, were ever with you here.

Nero. Dear mother! Come with us, good friends,
and pledge

This happy day, that thus again unites
Friends who were parted—ne'er to part again.

Agrip. (*aside*). Is this all true, or do I dream it all?

Nero (*to Anicetus*). Did she suspect, that she refused
to take

The galley?

Ani. Yes; I think she did.

Nero. Well, keep

The galley ready, she'll go back in it.

(*Aloud.*) Yes! send the sailors wine, and bid them
pledge

With flowing cups my noble mother's health,

And bid the priests to offer up their vows.
This is indeed, indeed, a happy day.
Say, shall we go to table? you must need
Refreshment after this long tedious ride.
Dear mother, welcome yet again, the sun
Shines brighter on us now that you are here!

[*They go in.*]

SCENE VIII.

BURRHUS *and* SENECA.

Bur. What does this mean?

Sen. Mischief it means, of course.

Bur. What is he hatching now within his brain?

Sen. Ask Anicetus, for I think he knows.

I saw the Emperor whispering with him.

Bur. Has he confided nothing to your ear?

Sen. No; nothing.

Bur. She is on her guard, I think.

Sen. Of course she is ; and yet how well he acts.
No player better could assume the part.
He smiles and looks into her eyes, and sighs
Almost as if he were her lover,—then
At times he takes her hand and presses it
Not openly, but bashfully, as 'twere
From shy affection—then with pretty skill
Alludes to this, to that,—“ Oh, mother dear !
Don't you remember ? ” On my faith I think
She half believes him !

Bur. So in truth it seems.
Well ; if this sultry day breeds not a storm,
I am not weather-wise.

Sen. Do you observe
How Agerinus never takes his eyes
From off the Emperor ? How Gallus, too,
Watches, and starts at every sudden noise ?
And Acerronia, too, keeps startled guard ?

Bur. Ay, they keep watch : and Anicetus, too,
Fidgets too much ; something is on his mind.

Sen. We do not drive our horse, our horse drives us.
Little by little all my guidance fails.

Each day he grows more wilful, violent,
Imperious, we can only yield to him.

Bur. An adder's egg will only hatch an adder,
Sure in the end to sting. Would I were far
From Cæsar and the court,—I hate it all!

Sen. Yet we must stand together to the end.

Bur. 'Twill not be long, if I read signs aright.
But peace, they come.

Enter the Imperial party and attendants.

Agrip. Darkness draws on,—the rosy clouds that swim
On the pale twilight sea like golden fish,
Are fading every moment. It is time
To leave you.

Nero. What! So soon? Oh stay at least
One little hour! How short the day has seemed!

Agrip. Time to the happy is so fleet of foot,
And limps so slow when we are sad at heart.

Nero. Yet stay awhile.

Agrip. Indeed I must be gone.
Darkness comes on apace. See, the keen stars
Begin to twinkle.

Nero. But the night is clear,
The moon in half an hour will rise, and make
Your journey brighter.

Agrip. Dearest Nero, thanks ;
'Twere better I should go at once.

Nero. At least
You'll not refuse the galley to return.
The sea is still as glass—burnished with light,
'Twill bear you gently and without fatigue.
Say, Anicetus, were't not better so?

Ani. Cæsar, your royal mother would not know,
Shut but her eyes, she were not on her couch
In her own room, on such a sea as this.

Agrip. Nay, then, dear Nero, be it as you will.

Nero. I will escort you to the shore myself.

Agrip. Come, Acerronia, Crepereius, all,
We will depart.

Nero. When shall we meet again?
Let it be soon, my mother.

Agrip. When you will.
Ah ! what a happy, happy day is this !

[*They go out.*]

SCENE IX.

Enter two Slaves—DAVUS and GALLUS.

Dav. Oh Jupiter, how tired out I am !

Gal. What work ! I have not sat down half an hour
Since early morning. I will stretch myself
Here on this couch. There's no one here to see.

Dav. Come here ! go there !—it's thus the livelong
day.

I hope they'll soon return. I long for bed.

Gal. I'd like to have our Cæsar for my slave
Just for one day—one day would be enough——

Dav. Silence : just think so,—don't speak out—
these walls

Have ears and tongues.

Gal. Have they not eyes as well,
To see you lying there ?

Dav. I'll risk it. Go,
Look out, I pray you, Gallus ; where are they ?

Gal. (*looks out*). She is embarking. They are taking leave.

Oh how he loves her! Look, they now embrace.

He kisses her upon her eyes and breast.

Now the oars lift. Hark! do you hear the crowd?

Now the long train winds backward like a snake

Along the terraced walks. Quick! up and off!

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE X.

Enter NERO, SENECA, BURRHUS, *and the rest.*

Nero. Farewell, my friends,—leave me awhile alone;
I am fatigued. But do not quit the house;
Go to the atrium and await me there.

[*They go out.*

NERO *alone.*

Rest! Rest! I cannot rest! Almost I wish
I had not listened to the scheme at all.

She was so gentle and so kind to-day.
It seems a cursèd act the gods themselves
Will not forgive. Would I could call her back !
Too late ! too late, now ! yet perchance 'tis not.
Where are they? *[Goes to look out.*

Ah ! too far ! how my nerves twitch !

Great God, I wish 'twere over ! In an hour
'Twill all be over. Let me rest and wait.

[Lies down, and then suddenly gets up.

'Tis vain ! I cannot rest ! If they should fail,
How would the world, that loves me not too well,
Gather against me ? Hark ! what noise is that ?
I hear a far and strange confusèd sound ;
Torches are flickering all along the shore ;
The galley's gone ! Oh, what a fool was I
Not to bid Anicetus signal me
If all succeeded ! Now I here must wait
Till I could tear myself from nervousness.
If, after all, the scheme should fail at last,
And she escape,—would she not rouse the world
And hunt me down to death ? Yes, by the gods !
Who's there ?

Enter SENECA, BURRHUS, *and* ANICETUS.

Sen. Cæsar, a messenger.

Nero. A messenger! From
where?

Sen. Comes from along the shore: sent, as he says,
To bring you tidings of an accident
Threatening your mother's life.

Nero. Quick! bring him in!
[AGERINUS brought in.

Your news! your news!

Ager. A dreadful accident!

Nero. My mother is alive?

Ager. Cæsar, she is.

Nero. Alive? unhurt? unwounded?—Quick, I say!
Speak, quick!

Ager. Ay, Cæsar, all unwounded and unhurt.

Nero. Great Jove! Hark, villain! if you dare to lie
I'll flay you!

Ager. I but speak the simple truth.

Nero. How was it? Speak, and tell your story quick!
And don't stand gaping there like a dull fool!

Ager. Cæsar,—the galley, skirting close to shore,

Had barely doubled the first cape of land,
When suddenly a startling noise was heard :
The canopy, 'neath which the Empress lay
Surrounded by her friends, fell with a crash !
The galley opened,—all was wild alarm,
Cries and confusion ! By some fortune rare,
The couch's sides, projecting, saved from death
The Empress. Crepereius perished, crushed,
And Acerronia, shrieking for her life,
Cried out she was the Empress. But, alas !
An oar or pole then struck her, and she sank.
In vain we sought the Empress,—in the dark
We thought her drowned ; for everywhere in vain
We called her, up and down the shore. At last,
Beyond the crowd, I found her in the charge
Of some poor fisherman,—who there by chance
Had seen her floating, and had rescued her.
To you, great Cæsar, her first thought was given.
“ Go, Agerinus,—go,” she said, “ and bear
This message to my son.—His mother lives ;
But bid him calm his fears,—I am not hurt.
Say that the gods preserved me ! Haste away !

Bear comfort to him ! Tell him not to come,
For I am safe,—and all I need is rest !”

[ANICETUS *secretly drops a dagger*
at the feet of AGERINUS.]

Ani. Look ! what is here ? A dagger ! Seize on him !
Assassin ! would you take our Cæsar’s life ?

Nero. A dagger ! what ?

Ani. Oh, villain ! who was it
Thus set you on ?

Ager. No one. It is not mine !

Ani. Seize him, I say !

Ager. The dagger is not mine,—
My message was of peace, and not of death.

Ani. Liar ! it was your mistress sent you here,
Armed with that dagger for our Cæsar’s heart !

Ager. ’Twas not,—’tis infamous ! Oh, Cæsar, hear !

Nero. Off with him !

Ager. Cæsar, list to me, I say !
’Tis all a lie !

[*He is carried out.*]

Nero. Off with him ! Now, indeed,
What’s to be done ? The tigris has broke loose !

You, Seneca,—you, Anicetus,—you,
Burrhus !—Will no one speak ? What's to be done ?

Sen. The moment's grave !

Nero. What's to be done, I say ?

Why stand you silent thus ?

[*After a pause.*

Speak ! act for me !

She will be bent on vengeance now : she'll arm
Her slaves,—she'll stir the army up to rage,—
She'll to the Senate flee,—dress out this act
With startling words, with menace,—that may shake
My throne from me. She'll call me parricide,
And set the world against me. We must act—
Act, and at once ! Speak, friends, and counsel me !

Sen. Say, Burrhus, can you trust your soldiery
To finish this bad work ? since it's begun
It will not do to leave it as it is.

Bur. She is the daughter of Germanicus,—
There's no Prætorian that would lift his hand
To harm her.

Nero. Gracious gods ! what shall we do ?

Sen. Yet something must be done, and done at once.

Be sure her message is a feint,—she knows
Her death was menaced. No one head of ours
Is safe upon our shoulders while she lives.

Ani. Leave it to me.

Nero. Yes, yes! you who began
Must finish it.

Ani. I will not fail this time.

Bur. What is your plan?

Ani. My plan is clear enough.
Why think you that at Agerinus' feet
I dropped the dagger? 'Twas to raise the cry,
That she had sent him to attempt the life
Of Cæsar! Therefore, with that cry I rouse
My band of soldiers,—I can trust to them.
I will assail her, striking down her guards,—
And trust me this time she shall not escape.

Nero. Thanks, thanks! Oh, Anicetus, may the gods
Reward you! Thanks, you are the best of friends.
Go! go! and quickly let me know the end!

[ANICETUS goes out.]

Think you he'll fail? Oh, Burrhus, Seneca,
Stand by me,—don't desert me! Are the doors

All closely barred? Are all the people gone?

Where's Agerinus? think you he is safe?

Bur. Fear not; for we must stand or fall together!

Nero. See that the guards are closely set to-night!

The watchword? Ah! let it be "Best of mothers!"

'Twill blind the eyes of those who may suspect.

Sen. Shall we retire?

Nero. No, no! both stay with me!

I would not be alone,—I could not sleep.

Think you that Anicetus will succeed?

Sen. I think he will. Should you not better rest?

Nero. I cannot sleep! I say I cannot sleep!

SCENE XI.—AGRIPPINA'S *Villa*.

AGRIPPINA and SOSIA (*her handmaid*).

Sosia. Weep not, my lady! Rest upon this couch.

Let me arrange the pillows. Does your arm

Much pain you?

Agrip. No, 'tis not my arm that pains.

Sos. Where is the pain, then ?

Agrip. In my heart, my heart !

Sos. What ! were you hurt there, then ?

Agrip. Yes, hurt to
death !

Sos. What can I do for you to ease your pain ?

Agrip. Nothing ! no, nothing ! Speak no more to me !
Leave me alone ! No, stay !

Sos. I pray you rest,—
This agitation is not good for you :
Bear up against it !

Agrip. Ay, I will—I will !
Great Jove ! that all those sweet and honeyed words
Should be the prelude to so foul a crime !
I had not thought him quite so base as that.
Only my silence saved my life. Oh, foul,
Unnatural son ! Base, cruel, wicked heart !
If Agerinus did his message well,
Perchance he'll think I deem this savage plot
Only an accident, and let me live.
Yet, what is life worth now ? The shadow dread

Of Nemesis, that long has dogged my steps,
Is drawing near to strike her fatal blow,
And end it all. So be it : better Death
Than life, thus dragging on, pursued by Fate !
Domitius was right ;—what could be born
From him and me, but some dire monster, sent
To carry ruin everywhere,—to all ?
Oh, Nero ! Nero ! You who from this breast
First sucked your milk, and looked up in my face,
Smiling,—whom with my love I girt about,—
For whom in wild, ambitious hopes I cried
(When the Chaldeans said that should you reign,
My life should fall a forfeit to your hand),
“ Then let him kill me, if he may but reign ! ”
And now the end that they foretold is near.
Oh, Nero ! Nero !

Listen ! what is that ?

I hear a noise of trampling feet,—a din
Of voices,—nearer ! nearer !

Call my guards !

Let them surround me ! No, you have not time !

[SOSIA *tries to slip away.*

Stay, stay! do you desert me too? Well, go!
Here I can die alone! Whose voice is that?

[ANICETUS *breaks in, followed by*
HERCULEUS *and* OLOARITUS.

What! Anicetus?

Ani. Ah! I find you then

At last!

Agrip. I'm here, you see: what does this mean?

Ani. It means your messenger hath failed to slay
Our Cæsar, as you ordered him. It means
That the same death you planned for him returns
To strike the heart that planned it.

Agrip. 'Tis a lie!

None knows it better than yourself. A lie
As infamous as false! Who sent you here?

Ani. Cæsar, your son; therefore prepare for death!

Agrip. My son? No, never! If you mean a crime,
He sent you not. 'Tis gross, unnatural!
He is no parricide!

Her. Peace, woman, peace,

Your hour has come. Take this that Cæsar sends!

[*Strikes at her—she falls back.*

Agrip. Not there! Here—strike the womb that
Cæsar bore!

[ANICETUS runs her through with
his sword—all the soldiers cover
her with wounds.

[Dies.

Ani. Bear her away. So, that is done at last!

END OF ACT III.

A C T IV.



SCENE I.—*Palace of Cæsar.*

TIGELLINUS, RUFUS *coming in to him.*

Ruf. Where's Cæsar?

Tigel. In the music-hall. Hark! there!
He's practising the song he sings to-day.

Ruf. Ay, 'tis the Juvenalis—I forgot—
What does he sing?

Tigel. A song composed by him
To his own music.

Ruf. And how is it?

Tigel. Hum!—
So, so, like all the other things of his,—
Not bad, not good.

Ruf. Hark ! there's another voice !

Tigel. That is the Empress. What a voice is hers !
It seems to draw the very soul from you,
So pure, so thrilling, and so rich and full.

Ruf. After his hoarse, weak voice, it sounds as clear
As doth the nightingale's after the crow's.
How short his breath is ! Listen to him now,—
Who plays to him ?

Tigel. He plays himself—

Ruf. And well ;
His touch is good ; he plays with taste and skill.

Tigel. He is an artist,—that we must admit.
Pity he tries so many forms of art.
Were he content with one he might excel,
But nothing will content him ; he aspires
Not to sing only, but to model, paint,
Drive, dance, sing, fight, do everything, at once.
Life is not long enough for every art.

Ruf. By Hercules !—not long enough for one.

Tigel. Yet the great Greeks had two arts at the least,
And sometimes more.

Ruf. Exceptions to the rule ;

Margites is the rule ; you recollect
The old Homeric epigram on him ?

Πόλλ' ἠπίστατο ἔργα κακῶς δ' ἠπίστατο πάντα—

“ Many a thing he knows, and every one of them ill.”

So is our Cæsar.

Tigel. He is Cæsar still.

He has not failed in that ?

Ruf. Perhaps ; who knows ?

It is the end alone that crowns success.

Tigel. After the storm all things look calm again.

The hand of Agrippina is at rest ;

It moves no more to menace or to strike ;

Poppæa calmly sits upon her throne,

And poor Octavia far in exile pines,

Too weak to raise a tumult in the mob.

Ruf. It looks so, but these quiet days breed storm.

Tigel. Bah ! When the storm comes we shall weather
it—

But hark—no more ; I hear their steps approach.

Enter CÆSAR and POPPÆA.

Tigel. and Ruf. Hail, Cæsar !

Nero. Hail to both, my worthy friends !

Tigel. and Ruf. Hail, madam !

Pop. Health and happiness to you.

Nero. What is the time ?

Tigel. Two hours as yet to noon.

Nero. Two hours ! ah, then we have an hour to spare
Before the Juvenalis.

Tigel. Shall you sing,
Cæsar, to-day ?

Nero. I shall : and, on my soul,
I think they will applaud my song to-day.
Music, and words, and playing, all are mine.
My voice is fresh and clear. Hear, is it not ?

[Sings a few notes.

Tigel. Most perfect.

Nero. Ay, I'm in good voice to-day—
Say, am I not, Poppæa ?

Pop. Ay, my lord.

Nero. There is a draught here. Shut that window close.

Give me a handkerchief. Yes, yours will do,
My best Poppæa. Ay, so—round my throat—
These draughts oft breed a sudden huskiness,
And, as fate wills it, they will always come
Just when they should not.

Pop. Nay, I never heard
Your voice when it was clearer—have no fear.

Nero. Ah, yes; I think I shall sing well to-day.
Those stiff old fools of senators, who frown
Because a Cæsar sings, at least shall own
That Cæsar can sing well; upon my life,
What stupid fools they are with all their pride!
Why should not Cæsar sing? It is an art
Practised of old by heroes and by kings,
Famed in the song of poets, and performed
In honour of the gods. Music and song
Are to Apollo sacred. That great god,
In this same dress, with this same instrument—
In Grecian and in Roman temples stands
Sublime, oracular. If Apollo, then,
That splendid deity, scorn not this art,
Shall Cæsar scorn it? Shall these senseless men

With their sour faces, their besotted pride,
Dare to scowl on it? 'Tis too much, in sooth!

Tigel. Ah, yes; they deem with grave and serious airs
To hide from sight their sheer stupidity—
The pompous zanies!

Nero. But we'll have our art
Despite them, Tigellinus. Shall I bow
Before their crabbèd wills? No, no, my friend,
They'll have to march my way, and to my time.
Dull owls that dare to jeer the nightingale!
Is it not so, Poppæa?

Pop. Ay, my lord,
Let them deride; the poet's song shall live
To be a joy to far posterity,
When they, and all they say, do, think, and feel,
Have passed and vanished, leaving no more trace
To mark their passage than a swallow's wing
On the unwounded air through which it cleaves.

Nero. Why, what were Troy, if Homer had not
sung?
What were Antigone or Œdipus,
Had Grecian poets never told their tale?

Or what were Greece bereft of all those arts
That lent the gods themselves a grander grace,
A nobler presence, and a larger power ?
Did not Jove smile on Phidias as he wrought ?
And yet these senators with trivial saws
And proud pretences dare deride the Arts !
Well, Tigellinus, let them scowl ; we'll laugh
While we enjoy our life, despite them all.

Tigel. We will, my Cæsar.

Pop.

Not to speak of Greece—

In our own day will not Marcellus live
In Virgil's verses—shrined beyond decay,
Within that amber tomb of deathless verse—
Whose very name without *his* aid had passed
To dark oblivion ? Blest the poet's song,
The sculptor's art, the painter's living hues,
That thus can make a transient form, a glance,
A smile immortal ; time and age defy ;
Seize the swift-hurrying thought, and bid it stay,
To be a permanent, perpetual joy !

Nero. Yes ; many an after-age shall see your face
As sweet and fair as now it smiles on me,

When both have vanished into death and dust.
Such power has Art. A thousand years from now !
Think of it, think, Poppæa !

Pop. True, too true !

And yet the thought is sad. We shall be gone,—
The light will shine for others, not for us.
We shall be gone,—but these unpitying skies
Will change not—careless of who comes and goes ;
Smile on new lives, forgetful of the old,
And feel no shadow of regret. How cold,
How heartless Nature seems to man ! With her,
All are alike : she knows no favourites ;
She has no love, no hate,—all are alike !

Nero. No ; she has given you a lovely face
That she denies to others. To us all
She gives the present,—we are free to cull
What joys we will,—they lie upon our path
If we will take them.

Pop. No, she does not give ;
She lends an instant, and then snatches back
The moment's gift. What can we call our own ?
What can we keep and hold ? Nothing is ours.

She only taunts us ;—every joy she gives
 Slips from our hold the instant it is given.
 With faithless promises she lures us on,
 And laughs at us. The Present ? no, even that
 She gives not,—in an instant 'tis the Past !

Nero. Time's current runs, and we must go with it.

Tigel. Indeed it does. Time goes ; the hour draws near
 For the Juvenalis.

Nero. Ay, 'tis time to think
 How I shall dress. Your counsel ;—shall I wear
 Apollo Citharædus' flowing robes,
 Broidered with gold, and sweeping to the ground,
 Pure perfect white ? Will that become me best ?
 Or shall I wear the Asian dress, all loosed,
 Without a girdle, and with drooping sleeves ?

Pop. The Asian dress. 'Tis here. I like this best.
 So,—we will robe you. Now this wreath of flowers,—
 Roses, fresh roses, in your golden curls—
 'Twill give them a fresh lustre. Now clasp on
 These bracelets, they set off your arms so well ;—
 Ay, that is right.

Nero. Thanks, my Poppæa, thanks !

There is a kiss for you ! How do I look ?

Pop. Bright as Apollo !

Nero. Now, then, let us go.

Come, Tigellinus : come, my dearest love.

Pop. Go, I will join you in the portico,—

I must arrange my hair.

Nero. Be not too late.

Pop. Nay, never fear : I would not miss your song
For a whole galley laden down with pearls.

Nero. Then you shall have them, if you are not late.

[*Exeunt all but POPPÆA.*

Pop. Ah, Nero ! Nero ! were you ever thus ?

What could I ask for more ? Should I not be
Too happy—yes, too happy ? But how long
Will this mood last,—who knows, alas ! who knows ?

Well, well, I will not darken this bright hour
With sad presentiment of what may come.

Could I but free him from the influence
Of Tigellinus, and Senecio.

I like them little—I distrust them more.

They whip his vices onward. Well, ah, well !

I for the best must hope, and fear the worst.

SCENE II.—*Room in the house of Piso.*

Conspirators—SUBRIUS FLAVUS, FENIUS RUFUS, LUCAN, PLAUT. LATERANUS, SCÆVINUS, PISO, NATALIS.

Piso. We've had enough of this accursed house.
Ye gods, how Rome hath suffered 'neath its rule !
Now worst of all,—worse than Caligula,
Far worse than Claudius,—the learned fool,
Nero, remains ;—foul with debauch and crime ;
Insatiate of blood ; his thirst unquenched
By murder of his friends,—his brother, wife,
His mother,—he would spill the blood of all.
No man is safe in Rome while Nero lives !
'Tis time to shake this incubus away ;
And ours must be the hands to do this deed.
Are we agreed on this ? If any here
Shrink from the task, let him speak boldly out.
Speak, Flavus, Lateranus, Lucan, say !
Rufus, Scævinius ! are we all agreed ?

All. Ay, we are all agreed !

Piso.

Unsheathe your swords,

Lift high your hands !—Now may the immortal gods

Blast him with ruin who shall break this oath—

“Fidelity to each,—to Nero death !”

All. We swear !

Piso. How shall we compass, then, his death ?

He is so guarded, 'tis no easy thing.

Flav. No ; yet at times the whim will seize on him

To ramble through his galleries at night

All unattended ;—there, when off his guard,

We might attack him, and make way with him.

Scæv. 'Twere difficult, and dangerous as well.

Already Proculus suspects a plot,

From idle words that Epicharis dropped,

And has infected Cæsar with his fear.

Besides, time presses, and we must not wait.

Flav. Suppose, then, while he roams the streets by

night

Without his guard, and in some base disguise,

Drunken with revel, we should set on him.

Lat. It will not do ; we must not wait for chance,

But make it for ourselves,—fix time and place,
And strike together. Lucan, what say you ?

Luc. I say the bolder is the safer way :
Let us go to him, as to offer him
A prayer for something, and then fall on him.
You, Lateranus—Consul now elect—
Bear a petition to him. Kneeling there
Before him to present it, grasp his knees,
And pull him to the ground,—then one of us
Will stab him ere he rise !

Lat. I am agreed
For my part. Who of you will strike the blow ?

Scæv. I will ! If so seem good to all of you,
Let me be first to strike the tyrant down.
Here is the dagger that shall make us free !
'Tis from the Temple of Ferentum, built
To Fortune,—and 'tis pledged to some great deed.

Piso. What say you, friends ?

Flav. So be it !

Nat. So say I !

Piso. So let it be then,—we are all agreed.

Scævinius ! You and Lateranus fix

The hour between you, as it suits you best.
All will be near you, to make sure of him,
In case the first blow do not end his life.

Lat. I fix the day now. Let it be the seventh,
At the sixth hour. It is the sacred day
To Oxus dedicate. There at the games,
When he comes forth, as he is sure to do
(For he is never absent when blood runs),
With my petition I'll present myself,
And pluck him down. Will you be ready then?

Scæv. I will be ready.

Lat. *Piso,* as for you,
In Ceres' Temple you will wait for us.
When the deed's done, Fenius shall come for you.
Together, then, we'll bear you to the camp,
And there proclaim you Cæsar!

Piso. Nay, good friends,
I am not worthy; seek some better man.
I do not pull this monster from the throne
To sit on it myself.

Lat. Nay, shrink not back:
Hold you to us, as we shall hold to you.

All is agreed, friends, is it not?

All. It is!

Lat. May the gods help us on the appointed day!
Silence and secrecy till then. Our lives
Hang on a word. Now, let us separate.

SCENE III.—*Imperial Palace.*

N E R O, P O P P Æ A, and T I G E L L I N U S.

Nero. Now, my Poppæa, are you satisfied?

Pop. Ay, my good Cæsar.

Nero. Is there anything
Which now you need?

Pop. Nothing; you now are mine,
I yours—what is there left to ask for more?
Life is before us now to act and speak
As the whim prompts—free, free of every one.

Nero. We must build up these galleries anew,

The fire hath spoiled these marbles utterly.
Gods ! what a sight it was when the fierce flames
Licked the black night, and all Rome was ablaze—
A sight to make one's spirits leap for joy !
Here night on night I stood and gazed at it,
Never was weary : now and then a crash
Shook all the palace ; then a bursting mass
Of sparks and smoke and ashes flew aloft
And rained again to earth ; then darting tongues
Of living flame ran swift along the roofs,
Insatiate to destroy, with a fierce rage.
They say, I hear, I set our Rome afire ;
That's a mean lie. They tell such lies of me !

Pop. Where is the poem that you wrote on it ?

Nero. I'll read it to you, love, this very day,
And sing it too.

Tigel. May I not also hear ?

Nero. Ay, if you will.

Tigel. I hear that Seneca
Did not applaud it—thought it weak and tame.

Nero. Did he ? He praised it to my face.

Tigel. Of course,
He dared not otherwise ; behind your back
He laughed at it.

Nero. The villain ! Did he dare ?

Tigel. Oh Cæsar, he's your rival !—says he writes
Your verses for you—all your eloquence
Flows from his stylus—without him, indeed,
The world would laugh to see what you produce.

Nero. Ah ! says he thus ?

Tigel. And what he cannot do,
As driving, singing, playing on the harp,
Which all the world can see you do yourself,
He flouts at, mocks at. Let us set him up
With that dull, ugly, leering face of his,
And bid him sing, and drive a chariot-race,—
Ye gods ! how men would laugh to look at him !

Nero. Ah ! so he mocks and flouts me. By the
 gods,
I'll make him change his tune !

Pop. Oh, Cæsar dear,
Think not of him—let him not vex your mind.

Pray, Tigellinus, speak no more of this ;
He can harm no one, Cæsar least of all.
I'll not believe he mocks and flouts at him—
I'll not believe it.

Tigel. Madam, it is true,
I had not said it else.

Pop. Cease, cease, I pray ;
Fret not our Cæsar with this idle talk—
'Tis all base scandal out of envy bred.

Tigel. Madam, I pray you pardon, 'tis not I
Invent this scandal ; 'tis, alas, too true ;
All know it ; 'tis the common talk of Rome.

Pop. Well, say no more. Come, Cæsar, shall we
stroll
Along the terrace? See, the air is soft—
Come.

Nero. Ah ! so, then, he dares to laugh at me ?

Pop. Think no more of it—'tis an idle tale ;
Ay, I am sure he never speaks of you
But with affection, and with pride as well.
'Tis the large gifts you have bestowed on him

That the world envies, and would pull him down.

Come, Nero.

[*Goes to the balcony.*]

Nero (*stays behind*). Tigellinus, is this true?

Tigel. Ay, Cæsar ; and it rouses the just ire
Of all your friends, mine most of all, I think,
Till, on my soul, I cannot, as I ought,
Restrain my words ; I must speak out to you.

Nero. Thanks, Tigellinus, thanks ; you are my friend,
My best friend : this is common talk, you say?

Tigel. Ay, Cæsar,—and not this alone——

Nero.

What ! more?

Tigel. Ay, they all say he dares to vie with you
In splendour. Gardens, villas, like to his,
Are scarcely fit for a philosopher
Who preaches up the charms of poverty.
What foul hypocrisy ! His avarice
Would swallow Rome up and be hungry still.

Nero. He has but what I gave him,—that is all.

Tigel. All, and enough, and far more than enough ;
And yet, so boundless is his greed of gain,
So boundless his ambition, that indeed

I fear me—— Cæsar, are you sure of him?

Nero. How? Sure of him? You do not think he'd
dare

Conspire against me?

Tigel. Nay, I only asked.

There are dark whispers : with such wealth as his,
Should he conspire, he would be dangerous.
Send him away, my Cæsar.

Nero. By the gods !

It shall be done.

Tigel. Do not too long delay.

Pop. (*coming back—to TIGELLINUS*). I thank you, sir.

I see by Cæsar's face,

You have obeyed my wishes. My best thanks——

Tigel. Madam, I——

Pop. Nero, is't not now the hour

You have appointed for the chariot-race?

Nero. Ay, true—I had forgotten ; 'tis the hour,
And I'm not ready. Bid them bring my robes.
Those Christians that so hate the human race,—
That damnable and superstitious sect,—

Are to be hunted down this afternoon.

I would not lose the sight. Be quick, be quick!—

They're to be clad in skins and chased by dogs.

Gods! it will be such sport to hear them yell

When the dogs tear them!

Pop.

Horrible, I say.

Oh do not do it, Nero. Stay with me.

I thought 'twas but a chariot-race, not that.

Nero. Peace, peace, Poppæa! Tigellinus, quick,

Bring me my robes, and bring me, too, my purse;

And see that wide largess is flung about

Among the crowd,—I hear they grumble still.

What would they more? Have I not ordered food

To be dispensed?—have I not sheltered them

In my own gardens?—opened for them, too,

The buildings of Agrippa?—built them sheds?

What would they more? 'Tis not my fault fire burns.

Now to distract them here's a spectacle

Of hunted Christians. Fling them wide largess,

And tell them 'twas these Christians burnt their homes.

Come, my Poppæa, will you go with us?

Pop. No, no! I cannot see such sights as these.

Nero. Why, you who love the Jews should like to see
These Christians who despise them hunted down.

Pop. I would see no one hunted down to death.
I've seen enough.

Nero. If you were Acte, now,
It would not seem so strange. Acte, you know,
Pretends to like these Christians,—has, perchance,
Some lover in their sect; but what moves you
To pity them?

Pop. Oh Nero, do not go!

Nero. But I will go. What has come over you?
You were not wont to be so weak as this.

Pop. Yes, I am weak, I know. I am not now
As once I was; but full of wild, strange fears.

Nero. You are not well. Go to your couch and rest,
And here's a kiss. Farewell!

Pop. Farewell, my lord!

[*Exeunt.*

All I have gained I played for—all is mine;
And yet how stale, and dull, and flat it is!

Hoping is fire, possessing—a charred coal.
Yes I am Empress,—who knows for how long?
The wheel of Fortune turns, and Nemesis
Has her dark eyes upon me. Death may spring
From any corner, and with but a straw
Break the sharp charm of life ; and I that now
Breathe, move, smile, sigh, be in an instant's space
A clod—a ruined mass of senseless clay—
And all these passions, all these fears, hopes, joys,
The light of life's weak candle,—all blown out.
Burrhus is dead, and Agrippina sleeps
In her cold tomb ; Octavia, too, is gone ;
They cannot harm us further, nor we them—
Ah ! is it so? Are we beyond their reach?
Will they not lend their hand to turn the wheel
Upon whose upper summit I now stand?
Let me not think of it. Nero infects
My spirit with his superstitious fears.
Hark, what a shout ! They chase the Christians now !
Great heavens ! what horrors on this earth are done !

SCENE IV.—*House of Piso.*PISO *and* LATERANUS.

Piso. Things go from bad to worse. Why do we
wait?

Lat. 'Tis not yet time. The guards are doubled all ;
Nero suspects : are we quite sure of all ?

Piso. Doubt you of any ?

Lat. Not directly. Yet,
I would so many were not in the plot.
One chance word dropped might cost us all our heads.

Piso. Do not postpone, then, for the time is ripe.
The populace forgive not nor forget
The burning of their homes, done as they say
Under his orders. Heavens ! what a scene
Those frightful days beheld ! the shrieks, the cries,
The wild confusing sounds of old and young,
Mingled with crashing falls of smoking beams,
The thunder of great walls that now and then
Buried them in their ruins ; everywhere

Dead, mangled bodies ; often at their side
Friends, parents, children in their fierce despair
Invoking death, refusing to be torn
From the dead bodies ; groups and flying crowds
Rushing off madly, and unknowing where—
Stampeding in a mass like frightened steeds,
To rush into the very jaws of death—
Trampling each other down ; and, worse than this,
Horrible scenes of rapine, murder, crime,—
And through it all alone he seemed to joy
In the dread ruin.

Lat. Ay, the wretch, he did !

Then all these splendid works of ancient art,
Those noble monuments of our old Rome,
Those precious things that perished utterly,
And nothing ever can make good to us !

Piso. 'Tis not to be endured—that he should live.
Oh, our poor Rome ! we cannot give you back
What he has ruined ; but at least our hands
Can free you from his mad and reckless rule.
We all abet his crimes who hesitate.
Look, here is Seneca.

Enter SENECA.

Health to you, Seneca !

Where go you now ?

Sen. To Cæsar.

Lat. Go not there !

Keep out of sight ! Why do you place your head
Within the tiger's jaws ? Do you not know
The thirsty monster you can trust no more ?

Sen. I trust him not, and yet I am compelled
To stay in Rome. He will not give me leave
To quit the city.

Piso. Then, at least, take heed ;
Mind what you eat and drink. No friends of yours
Are Cæsar's counsellors, since Burrhus died.

Sen. Thanks for your counsel ; I'll take heed of it.

[*Exit* SENECA.]

Piso. Look at that man : his life hangs on a thread.
Cæsar is weary of him—means his death—
But will not let him go beyond his reach
Further than does a cat the helpless mouse
She plays with ere she kills. Poor Seneca !

SCENE V.—*Imperial Palace.*NERO *and* TIGELLINUS.

Nero. By heavens, such sport! How they did run
and shriek,
Those Christians! On my soul, I never laughed
More heartily! A pestilential set,
Are they not, Tigellinus?

Tigel. Ay, my lord.

Nero. What is it they believe in?

Tigel. They adore,
So I am told, an ass's head, and work
With foul and magic arts.

Nero. What! magic arts?

Tigel. Ay, as I hear.

Nero. Nay, then, they all shall die.
I'll root them out. Gods! they might loose on me
Mormolyceia, and Empusæ dire,
And evil Lamiaë, and all the brood

Sent by black Hecate forth to suck men's blood !
I must seek out some potent talisman
Against their machinations. Know you not
Some one more potent in their magic arts
To counteract them in their evil work ?

Tigel. Nay,—if you seek for potent talismans,
Know, Apollonius of Tyana
Is now in Rome—he whom some deem a god,—
He with his power would set at nought their arts.

Nero. Has he such magic power ?

Tigel. He has indeed.
Under your edict, he was lately brought
Before the Consul and myself. In sooth,
Such was his power, we deemed it for the best
To set him free at once.

Nero. Go to him then ;
Bid him prepare for me such talismans
As will enable me to set at nought
All these foul practices. Go ! go at once !

Tigel. I shall obey you.

[*Prepares to go out—meets SENECA—returns.*]

Seneca is here,
And craves admittance, Cæsar.

Enter SENECA.

Nero. Let him in.
Health to you, Seneca !

Sen. Great Cæsar, health !

Nero. What would my Seneca ?

Sen. Cæsar, I come
Once more to crave a boon. I am not well ;
Age comes upon me, and infirmities
So weigh me down, that I am nothing worth
For public service. While my hand could help,
My counsel aid, all that I was was yours,
And ever will be ; but I now am old,
And you have abler counsellors, though not
More faithful, at your side.

Nero. No, Seneca,
Not abler—not more faithful. Still I need
Your aid and counsel. No, I cannot spare
My old preceptor, my old friend. Besides,
The world would say I was not generous—

I drove my oldest and best friend away.

Sen. Thanks, Cæsar, for these kind and gracious
words :

You have been ever largely liberal,
Far, far beyond my best deserts, to me ;
You have enriched me so, that envious men
Bewray my name ; the honours you have heaped
Upon me, all unworthy, but excite
My enemies' cupidity. They seek
My downfall. Ah, I pray you let me go !
Take back this wealth that you have showered on me,
My benefactor,—take it all again ;—
A poor old man like me requires it not.
Take it, and spend it, Cæsar, on yourself.

Nero. No, no, good Seneca ! what once is given
Cannot be taken back. Enjoy it, then ;
None more deserves it than my oldest friend.
Stay with me ; I am young—I need you yet.
One of the brightest jewels in my crown
Were gone, should you depart. Ask anything
That I can grant, but do not ask me this.
What ! leave me ! Unto whom, then, could I turn

For wise advice, for pure philosophy,
For the fair art of poetry, but you?

Sen. Ah, Cæsar, I have nothing more to say.
Your friendly words prevail ;—old as I am,
Weary, unfit for duties at a court—
All that I am, poor as it is, is yours.

Nero. Thanks, my best Seneca ! how shall I prove
My gratitude? Say, have you any wish
That lieth in my power to gratify?
Speak, it is yours !

Sen. Cæsar, your liberal hand
Hath with o'erflowing measure brimmed my cup ;
Your kindness ever ran before each wish,
To greet and crown it ere it grew to shape.
Nothing is left to ask for,—I but ask
To kiss the hand that hath been bountiful
With never-failing favour.

Nero. Not my hand,—
Embrace me, Seneca ! (*Embraces him.*) And so farewell !

[*Exit* SENECA.]

Nero. Ah ! so you thought to slip away from me !
No, Seneca,—I am not quite so blind.

These thin pretences and hypocrisies
Will not avail you. Take heed how you move—
Look to your steps,—the path is perilous.

[*Exit.*

SCENE VI.

Enter MILICHUS and TIGELLINUS.

Mil. Can I not see the Emperor himself?

Tigel. If you have aught to say, say it to me.

Mil. 'Tis something that concerns him more than
you :

Nor am I sure that I can trust you.

Tigel. Slave !

Mil. I am no slave.

Tigel. Who are you ?

Mil. Milichus,

A freedman of Scævinius.

Tigel. Well, what else?

Mil. I have a secret that concerns the ears
Of Cæsar. If to him I may not speak,
So be it. I will bear my secret hence
To those who will reward my silence more
Than you my utterance.

Tigel. Speak it out at once,
Or I will bid the torture give you speech.

Mil. Kill me, you kill my secret with me too.

Tigel. Fool! I will promise in our Cæsar's name,
And in my name as well, if what you speak
Be worth the hearing,—ample, large reward.

Mil. No, I must say it unto Cæsar's self.

NERO *enters.*

Nero. What noise is this?

Tigel. Speak, Milichus! you see
Cæsar before you.

Mil. Mighty Cæsar, health!
I craved an audience in your ear to breathe
A secret that involves your life or death.

Nero. What!

Nero. Great God !

My life ! Who were they ? Tell me—tell me all !

Mil. Piso was there, and Lateranus too,
Natalis,—these are all I surely know ;
Others there are whom shrewdly I suspect,
As Seneca.

Nero. Ha ! Seneca ?

Mil. And Lucan.

Nero. Ha !

Mil. I but suspect these.

Tigel. Nay, I'm sure of it.

Nero. Speak, tell me more.

Mil. Cæsar, 'tis all I know.

Nero. Go back and watch ; bring every word to me ;
Keep eyes and ears wide open—do not lose
A wink, a breath. By heavens ! I'll have their heads
Before a day be passed.

Tigel. Nay, Cæsar ; wait
Till we unravel all the secret plot—
Know all the names, or some will slip away—
Some we shall lose.

Nero. Ay, we must crush them all.

Oh, quick, my Tigellinus—pray, be quick !

Stamp it all out at once : wait not a day.

Who knows what hour or place they may have fixed ?

Or how, or when, or where they mean to strike ?

Double the guards ;—let no one enter here.

(*To MILICHUS.*) You, hence at once,—go back,—keep
constant watch,

And never fear but I will pay you well.

Ay, you shall banquet in your master's halls,

And own them too. The curses of the gods

Rest on them all ! Away ! away at once !

[*Exit MILICHUS.*

Now, Tigellinus, come with me, away.

Enter POPPÆA.

Pop. What ails my lord ? what cloud is on your brow ?

Nero. Hinder me not ; I've business of weight.

Pop. What is it, Nero ?

Nero. I've no time to talk.

Another time. Come, Tigellinus, come.

Pop. Have you bad tidings ? What has happened ?

Nay,

Leave me not thus.

Nero.

Peace ! let me go, I say !

[Shakes her off, and exit.]

Pop. What can have gone amiss ? What has he heard
That he is thus disturbed ? Oh, who can tell ?
Perhaps 'tis nothing but an ugly mood ;
For who can count upon these passions quick,
Or track him through the tangles of his wild
And rambling humours ? He is changed of late—
Gets wilder, fiercer, stormier every day.
Oh, my ambition ! I have plucked the fruit
I coveted, and in my mouth 'tis sour.
Yes, I have bartered peace away—for what ?
A dangerous throne, a life of constant fear !
Why was I not content with what I had—
What am I but a slave—a fearful slave—
Despite the barren title that I own ?
Subject to every hour's caprice, and now
Doomed to be played with, and now thrown away.
Better the poor who live in calm content,
Goaded by no ambitions after power.
What though they toil all day beneath the sun ?

Sleep comes at night, and opens worlds to them
Grander and happier than all I own.
I toss and tumble, and within my brain,
My thoughts turmoiling only bring me pain.
All things I have to lose, nothing to gain.

SCENE VII.—*House of Piso.*

PISO, RUFUS, FLAVUS.

Ruf. We are betrayed. Natalis has been seized,
And under torture hath confessed the plot.
Lucan has had the baseness to confess.
Nothing remains but some bold sudden step.
Rouse, Piso ! think and act ere 'tis too late.

Piso. 'Tis now too late.

Flav. It never is too late.

Still we are free.

Piso. No, I abandon all—

I wait my death.

Flav. But I will not wait mine.
My name is yet unmentioned, so is yours,
Rufus ; stand by me, then, and strike with me !

Ruf. Count on me, if 'tis ever possible.

Flav. Scævinius and Natalis will to-day
Be brought before us. We shall sit beside
The tyrant on his seat, to judge them both.
If all goes right, even then 'tis not too late
To plunge a dagger in his heart, and free
Rome from its terror, and our friends from death !

Ruf. They say Natalis has named Seneca.

Flav. He yielded in his fear to their first threats,
While Epicharis, though a slave, held out,
Putting to shame our senators and knights.
Ay, though they tortured her with torments dire,
With all her broken limbs too weak to stand,
She only smiled, and never spoke a word ;
And when the insatiate Nero, foiled at this,
Ordered her slaves to bear her to her home,
And heal her wounds, that she again might feel
New tortures, and be forced to speak at last,
She, in her litter, knotted round her neck

Her girdle, and evaded him by death.

Piso. Brave creature!

Flav. Were we all as firm of heart,
Of such undaunted courage, even now
All might be saved.

Piso. No, no! 'tis all too late.

Flav. Then, if you will not act, go hide yourself.
Leave it to me and Rufus. If there come
A chance to us we will not fail to act.

Piso. 'Tis useless. Nay, I'll not deceive myself—
There is no hope for any one of us.

Ruf. Withdraw, then, to your villa—lose no time.
While life remains I'll not abandon hope.

Flav. 'Tis time we go.

Piso. Farewell! a long farewell!
We shall not meet again.

Ruf. Give it not up.
No, Piso, no! I will not say farewell—
I hope still. Yet, if all goes wrong at last,
Farewell, my noble friend—a last farewell!

Flav. Oh, curse this tyrant!—must it then be thus?

Piso. It must; there is no chance, no remedy.

Flav. Do not believe it ; but, if so, farewell !
Come, Rufus, we are late. Again, farewell !

[*Excunt.*

SCENE VIII.—*Capitol—Judgment-seat.*

Above.—NERO, RUFUS, FLAVUS, TIGELLINUS, and
Senators, seated.

Below.—SCÆVINUS, NATALIS, *Prisoners in chains,*
MILICHUS.

Guards, Attendants, Soldiers.

Nero. Confess, Scævinus.

Scæv. I am innocent.

Nero. Confess, I say, or we will tear your limbs
With tortures that shall make you find a tongue.

Scæv. I've nothing, Cæsar, to confess.

Ruf. Bring forth
The freedman Milichus.

[MILICHUS *is brought forward.*

Speak, sir, and say,
Is this man guilty of the crime alleged
Against our Cæsar's life?

Mil. Cæsar, he is.

Ruf. Is there, then, nothing you retract? Pause!
think!

Remember, this man's life hangs on your words.

Mil. I retract nothing—all I said is true.

Flav. What answer you, Scævinius?

Scæv. I deny .

All that he says,—it is a foul, base lie.

Ruf. Still, he affirms it.

Scæv. Shall that villain's word

Be placed against a senator's and knight's?

He was my slave ; I freed him,—heaped on him

My benefits, and, angered by some word,

Or greedy of reward—suborned, perhaps,

By some one of my enemies—devoured

With envy of the honours and the wealth

By Cæsar heaped upon me, now turns round,

And by a foul lie seeks my death. I say

'Tis all a lie.

Tigel. It is the simple truth.

You know it, so confess—tell us the names
Of all who joined you in this murderous plot.

Scæv. I've no accomplices.

Tigel. Natalis, speak !

Is not this true ?

Nat. 'Tis all a cruel lie.

Ruf. What ! do you both deny it ?

Nero. Then bring in

The tortures. Let us hear what then they'll say.

[*Tortures brought in.*

Clasp the boot there on both Scævinius' legs.

Stand ready there to drive the wedges down.

Tigel. Confess, Scævinius, or the torture now
Will force your lips to utter all you know.

Flav. Shall I ?

[*Makes a sign to RUFUS, to inquire if he shall stab NERO. RUFUS hesitates ; FLAVUS lays his hand on his sword, as if to draw it, when RUFUS grasps his arm and says—*

Ruf. Not yet. (*Aloud.*) What says Scævinius now?

Scæv. Nothing.

Ruf. Speak out.

Scæv. Take *my* life if you will,
Though I am innocent; but others' lives
I will not sacrifice to save my own.

Ruf. If there were others, name them; who were they?

Scæv. I know no more about the plot than you.
If you would win our Cæsar's gratitude,
Tell him yourself. You know as much as I.
Tell him yourself.

Nero (starts up). He hath confessed! What, guards!
Seize Fenius Rufus,—seize the prefect here!
What, villain!

[*RUFUS is seized and bound.*]

Ruf. Hear me, Cæsar!

Nero. Off with him,
And with Scævinius, and Natalis too!
All to the torture. No, stop—ere we go
We will know more. Strike, executioners,

With all your strength, and make Scævinius speak !

[*Executioners prepare to strike.*

Scæv. Mercy, great Cæsar !

Nero. Tell me all their names.

Scæv. I cannot.

Nero. Speak !

Scæv. Oh, cruel, cursed fate !

Must I, then, name them ?

Nero. Strike !—I will not wait.

Scæv. Piso was one.

Nero. Ah, ah !

Scæv. Lucan was one.

Nero. And Seneca ?

Scæv. Ay, Cæsar.

Nero. By the gods,

I thought so ! More ! I will have all their names.

Scæv. I have told all.

Nero. Off, then,—away with them !

Dig out this nest of serpents, keep them close—

Kill none of them till you have caught them all.

Away !

Flav. (*passing* SCÆVINUS). Base coward! miserable
wretch!

Nero. So, that is done. I thank you all. Farewell!
Stay, Tigellinus. Health to all; farewell!

[*Exeunt all but* NERO *and* TIGELLINUS.

Send quick to Seneca. Bid him at once
Answer this charge; we'll see what he can say.
If he explain it not as clear as day,
He dies.

Tigel. I shall obey you instantly.

[*Goes out.* NERO *calls him back.*

Nero. Ho! Tigellinus.

Tigel. Cæsar, did you call?

Nero. Why, what a fool, an arrant fool I am!

Why did I not take warning? Babilus—

Remember Babilus and what he said.

Tigel. What! the astrologer?

Nero. The same. Ah, yes!

This was the meaning of that hairy star

That has so long pursued me in the skies,

Threatening the heads of kings. Ah, Babilus,

Good was thy counsel—to avert at once
The fatal presage by the death of all.
’Tis not too late yet. Drive them all from Rome.
Starve, poison them—and all their children too.
Strangle them while they eat, or while they sleep ;
Kill them—no matter how—kill them at once—
So expiation shall be made for me,—
But kill enough.

Tigel. I pray you, Cæsar, pause—
Be moderate, be generous.

Nero. Fear you not ;
They cannot kill me yet. See, still I keep
My potent talisman—this figure here,
This tells me all the secrets yet to come.
Besides, the Oracle at Delphi said,
“ Fear thou no year except the seventy-third.”
A long time yet to come.

Tigel. Cæsar, it is.
Be patient, then—be moderate.

Nero. I say,
Sweep them away ! sweep all of them away !

SCENE IX.—*Villa, four miles from city.*

SENECA, PAULINA, and two Friends at supper.

Paul. Are you not weary, Lucius, with your ride?

Sen. No, 'twas a charming day; the cool breeze blew
Across the water, dotted here and there
With many a sail: the ever-varying scene
Made the day's journey short.

Paul. I feared 'twould prove
Too long a journey, Lucius, for your strength.

Sen. No, I am well. 'Tis pleasant to be here
At home with those I love. What news from Rome?

Friend. Painful.

Sen. Poor Lucan! Speak no more of that.
Well, he died bravely at the last—that's all
The comfort left us. How's Attilia,
His mother?

Paul. Ah! how can she be? To her
The joy of life is gone, and its last miles
Measure a heavy, lingering road to death.

Sen. Have you heard aught of Flavus ?

Paul. He is dead !

Sen. Dead ? Flavus dead ?

Paul. Ay, he was in the plot,
And, like the rest, he was betrayed, denounced.

Sen. Poor Flavus ! And how died he ?

Paul. Like a man !
Denying not he purposed Cæsar's death,
But glorying in the charge, and calling on
The gods to punish Nero. "Hear," he cried—
"While you were decent, and deserved esteem,
You owned no surer friend ; now, foul with crime,
Jeer of the world, pest of the world, who lives
Who does not scorn you—hate you—wish your
death ?

Comedian, jockey, murderer, parricide !"

Sen. Poor Flavus, my poor friend ! So, one by
one,
Life's props are lopped away.

Hark ! what is that ?
I hear the trampling of approaching feet.

Enter Servant.

Serv. Granius, the tribune of the guards, is here.

Sen. Admit him.

Enter Tribune.

Health and welcome to you, friend.

Whence do you come?

Gran. From Cæsar; forced to bring
A message that can claim no welcome here.

Sen. Speak, then.

Gran. He bids me say you are accused
As an accomplice in the murderous plot
Aimed at his life, and he demands of you
How you can purge your conscience of this crime.

Sen. There is no faintest shadow of the truth
In this denouncement; I am innocent.
Ever have I for Cæsar toiled, and sought
In all his honour, health, and happiness.

Gran. Yet it is said that you yourself declared
Your safety hung on Piso's—who was head
Of this conspiracy—and so 'twere best

He held aloof from you.

Sen. It is not true.

I have avoided Piso in no way.

If I have sought seclusion, the sole cause

Was failing health. Cæsar himself may judge—

Who knows I am not prone to flattery—

If one whose rank is consular would think

More of my humble safety than his own.

Gran. I will acquaint him with the words you say.

Sen. Say I am innocent—that all my life
Affirms it—every act, and thought, and word.

With such weak, empty, idle talk as this—

Which, were it true, means nothing, but in fact

Is false completely—would he overweigh

The service of my life? I'll not believe it.

Gran. Farewell! I would I felt as safe as you
That Cæsar with this answer is content!

[*Exit* GRANIUS.]

Paul. Oh, Lucius! what can this mean? Do you
think

There's danger in it?

Sen. Ay, dear wife, I do.

Paul. Great heavens! And has it come to this at last?

Sen. I fear it has : but weep not, pray be calm.
Who knows? I may take counsel of my fears
More than my judgment.

1st Friend. Oh, my Seneca,
Be sure you do! There's nothing here to rouse
Your fears. He hath but given you the chance
To speak, and to refute this foolish lie.

2d Friend. Besides, had Cæsar meant to menace
you,
He had not sent in such a form as this.

Paul. You think so, do you not?

Both. Surely we do.

Sen. Well, let us hope it. And yet, knowing him,
I fear him. Time alone will prove who's right.

1st Friend. Keep a good heart ; be sure 'twill end in
nought.

And so, farewell! We leave you to repose.

SCENE X.—*Imperial Palace.*

TIGELLINUS, POPPÆA, NERO.

Nero. Who of them now remain ?

Tigel. None, Cæsar, none,
Save Seneca ; the rest of them have paid
The forfeit of their life.

Nero. And Seneca—
What does he say ? If he deny it all,
The evidence is slight—how shall I act ?

Pop. Oh, pardon him—that wretched, poor old man,
Leave him his life ; 'tis but a few short years
That death can be delayed. He was your friend,
Your teacher—he has never done you wrong.
His hand was never in this plot.

Nero. Ah, yes !
He was my friend so long. I would not seem
To act unjustly, lest the world cry out.
We have had blood enough. He had no part
In this conspiracy.

Tigel. Believe it not !

No, he is shrewd and sharp, and he has hid
All proofs against him ; yet with fifty proofs
I should not feel more sure than I am now.

Nero. I do not think so.

Pop. Cæsar, let him live !

For my sake let him live !

Tigel. Ay, let him live

To polish up your verses, laugh at you,
And mock you for your singing. Rail at you,
And say—— Well, well ! no matter what he says.

Nero. What does he say ?

Pop. Oh, nothing ! be assured—

Nothing against you. Only evil tongues
Breed out of harmless words a wicked sense
They never had.

Nero. He dares not laugh at me !

Tigel. Dares not !—why, no ! not to your face, indeed.

Pop. No, nor behind your back, nor anywhere.

Nay, Tigellinus, spur not Cæsar on
To this sad act. Give his good impulse sway—
Let his heart speak. You see he shrinks from it.

No, Cæsar, let him live ! Though this be true,
What matters it ? Be great—be generous.

Nero. Ay, let him live—I will not take his life.
What matters it, in truth, what he may say ?
Words are but air—words cannot kill. Enough !
Yes, he shall live, Poppæa.

Pop. Now indeed
I know my Cæsar. Oh, my noble lord,
I thank you from my very heart of hearts !

Tigel. Ay, let him live ; I wash my hands of all.
I will not urge you more. 'Tis nought to me !

Pop. It cannot harm us ; there is blood enough
Upon our hands. This poor old broken man
Can never harm great Cæsar. He has stamped
The head of this conspiracy to death.
The tail, if tail there be, will never sting.

Tigel. Are you so sure ? Yes, Cæsar well may scorn
Such mockery as his ; but with his wealth
The man is powerful—wealth is always power.
And some, 'tis whispered, that are in this plot,
Had they succeeded, meant to offer him
The crown that Cæsar wears.

Nero. What! Seneca?

Tigel. Ay, Cæsar, so 'tis said. Flavus, his friend,—
So it is whispered—I'll not say 'tis true—
Still it is rumoured busily about,—
Flavus, his friend——

Nero. Well—well?

Tigel. Had the design
To offer the imperial power to him,
And that he knew it.

Nero. Were I sure of this!

Tigel. Where there is smoke there's fire. Grant 'tis
untrue,

This story, in its details, still remains
Some root to all these branches: out of nought
Nought grows: and what remains of it is this,
He must have known of this conspiracy,
Been somehow bound to it, for all these men
Were friends of his: they had not moved in it
Without, at least, his sanction—if not more.

Pop. 'Tis a foul lie, I'll answer with my life.

Nero. My mind's made up. What! think to wear
this crown!

What ! try to snatch it off my head—the fool !

Pop. Believe it not. You promised me his life.
'Tis all impossible. What ! he conspire,
Whom you have lifted to such height, and heaped
With Fortune's favours ! Oh, believe it not :
That were indeed too base ingratitude.
It is not true.

Tigel. I fear 'tis but too true.

Nero. Let him look to it : he shall die for it.
Who's there ?

Enter GRANIUS.

Gran. 'Tis I, great Cæsar—Granius.

Nero. You come from Seneca ?

Gran. Ay, my good lord.

Nero. What says he ?

Gran. He asserts his innocence,
Denies his speech with Piso, and declares
That every thought, and word, and act of his
All his long life has been to honour Cæsar.

Pop. Did I not say so ? Yes, he spoke the truth.

Nero. Ah ! did he ? When you gave him my command

Did he not show alarm and own his fault ?

Did he not say he should prepare to die ?

Gran. Not so, great Cæsar. He was calm and cool ;
No gloom was on his face, and in his words
No terror : he declared his innocence,
And in your justice solely placed his trust.

Nero. Well, he shall have my justice. Go to him,
Bid him prepare to die—to die at once.
Tell him he asks my justice—there it is !
See you he dies ; and now, begone at once.

[*Exit* GRANIUS.]

(*To* POPPÆA.) Nay, do not urge me, I will hear no more :
Your prayers are vain, Poppæa. He shall die.

SCENE XI.—*Villa of Seneca.*

PAULINA, SENECA, STATIUS ANNÆUS (*physician*),
and Friends.

Sen. Is not the morning close and thunderous ?

Paul. There is oppression in the heavy air,

As if a storm were threatening. Over Rome
Hangs a dark mass of gloomy thunder-heads.

Sen. 'Tis that which makes the dull ache in my brain.
Look out ! I think I hear the thud of hoofs——

Paul. A squad of horse——

Sen. That must be Granius.

Paul. The Tribune ! Heaven protect us !

Sen. Ay, he brings
Cæsar's commands. Nay, do not tremble so ;
Be calm.

Paul. Oh, Lucius !

Sen. Be calm, dear wife.

Enter Centurion.

It is not Granius, then. Yet, welcome, sir,
What news from Rome ?

Cent. 'Tis Granius sends me here,
To be the bearer of unwelcome news——
News that indeed I have no heart to tell.

Sen. Say it at once—you will not see me flinch.

Cent. Cæsar commands me—I can but obey,
Hard though the sentence that he bids me bring.

Sen. Nay, speak—I am prepared to hear it; speak.

Cent. My orders are to bid you die at once.

Paul. Great God! it is not true. It cannot be.

Cent. Madam, forgive me! I would give my hand
I were not forced to say so; but 'tis true.
Cæsar commands that Seneca shall die.

Paul. Die! Die! Oh, Lucius!

Sen. Peace, dear wife! be calm;
I am prepared. Nay, I expected this.
Give me the time but to revise my will,
And I am ready.

Cent. 'Tis not in my power
To grant a moment.

Sen. Well, so be it then.
To die is easy, but to live is hard.
Bear up, dear wife. Death comes to all at last.
What matters it a few days more or less?
Cæsar but offers me the key to rest,
Opens the door, and motions me to join
The noble army that has gone before.

Paul. Then, we will go together, Lucius.

Sen. Nay, live, Paulina!

Paul. What were life to me
If you are taken? No! We both have lived
Happy together; so we both will die.

Sen. Nay, live. Suppose that death had come to me
Of its own impulse. You would stay behind,
Despite your sorrow. You would live and say—
“Ay, he is gone; still in my heart he lives.”
I have done nought to forfeit that dear love
You ever gave me. Nothing have I done
To justify this punishment. But why
Call I it punishment? It is the key
To peace, to rest; a sharp and sudden pain,
Then all is over, and this weary heart
Suffers no longer. Do not weep, good friends.
You see that I am willing, ay, am glad
To go.

Friends. 'Tis not for you we grieve: to us
Is the great loss; to you alone the gain.

Sen. I would that time had been allotted me
Your merit to reward as it deserves.
You have been ever faithful, steadfast, kind;
And from these worldly goods I fain would leave

Some mark of gratitude. This is denied.
Take then my thanks and blessing. I bequeath
To you the memory of my life and thoughts,
And all I ever did of good and true.
Forget my faults : they are the ugly dross
That mixes with the gold in every life.
Remember all the virtues, cling to them,
And win a better fame, a happier fate.

Friend. Oh, tyrant fell ! will nothing satiate
Your bloody maw ? Oh, Rome, unhappy Rome !
Doth not death take enough away from us,
But that his cruel and accursed hand
Untimely to the grave should strike those down
Who were our props and stays ?

Staius. Oh, Seneca !
What horrible ingratitude is this,
That he you strove to win to virtue's side
Thus shamelessly should strike you down at last !

Sen. 'Twas unavailing. But who does not know
The cruelty of Nero ? Could I hope
Mercy from him, who did not stay his hand,
Wife, mother, brother from his path to sweep ?

Now I am ready,—give the dagger here.

Paul. Give one to me as well. Now, Lucius.

[*They both open the veins in their arms.*]

Sen. The blood runs slowly, and death shrinks
from me.

Oh my brave wife! Nay, stay not here to see
This poor life ebb away. Remove her, friends,
Spare her this sight—spare me her pain as well!

[*She faints, and is carried out.*]

Stat. Lucius, I fear you suffer.

Sen. Ay, the pain

Is more than I expected. I had thought
Death would be easier.

Stat. Oh, my friend, my friend!

Sen. Give me a draught of hemlock, Staius,
And that will end it sooner. I am weak,
So weak, and yet life will not quit its hold.
Some hemlock; let me die like Socrates.
Weep not, good friends, bear up! 'Tis not for long.

[*STAIUS gives him the hemlock.*]

Ay, that is it. Remember, friends, the soul
Will find in virtue a perennial spring.

Nothing is sure but virtue, that alone
Will make the gods propitious. Statius,
Can you not ease this pain? Another draught.

[STATIUS *gives it.*

Ay, death,—death,—death, come quick,—come quick
to me!

We live philosophers, we die as men.

All, all must come to this early or late—

The king, the beggar——

Stat. (aside to friends). Better bear him hence.

The blood has ceased to flow. (*Aside to an attendant.*)

Order a bath,

Let it be hot, we'll place our friend in that,

So that the life shall flow out with the blood.

In this state he may drag out hours of pain.

Sen. God is within us. Do you hear me, friends

We cannot shut the door so close, but He,

The Sacred Spirit, sees us through and through.

Fashion your thoughts, then, so you shall not shame

That he should read them.

Ah, this pain, this pain!

Remember this.

Strive, too, to be content.

If we but think so, little is enough.

Staius, will it be long before death comes?

Stat. I have already bid them to prepare
A bath—we will remove you there—and then
Open another vein.

Sen. Ay, Staius,
Do as you will.

Stat. Lift him and bear him hence.

Sen. I am ashamed to trouble you, dear friends.

[*They bear him out.*

SCENE XII.—*Imperial Palace.*

NERO, POPPÆA, and TIGELLINUS.

Tigel. Granius has come.

Nero. Admit him, then, at once.

Enter GRANIUS.

Well, sir?

Gran. Great Cæsar, Seneca is dead.

Nero. Farewell to him, then.

Pop. Tell us how he died.

Gran. Bravely, with many high and noble words.

When your command he heard, he said—" 'Tis well : "

And taking leave of all, opened his veins.

The blood not flowing, then he took a draught

Of hemlock ; and, that failing, he was laid

In a hot bath ; then, sprinkling on the slaves

Who stood beside him there some drops of it,

He said—" 'Tis a libation now I pour

To Jove the Liberator." Even then

Life would not leave him, and at last he died

Stifled within the sudatoria's steam.

Pop. Poor man ! My heart bleeds when I think of
him,

And more, of his poor wife. How is his wife ?

Gran. His wife, Paulina, opened too her veins,
Seeking to die with him——

Nero. And is she dead ?

Gran. No, Cæsar.

Pop. Save her ! Yet, why save her now ?
All that life had of joy died when he died.

Why bind her to this life, since all is lost—

And yet—yet——

Nero. Shall she live, Poppæa, say ?

Pop. Ay, Cæsar.

Nero. Then go back at once, and say,

I order her to live. She shall not die.

Enough of bloodshed there. I'll not incur

The odium of the rabble for her death.

Pop. Ay, let her live ! Out of joy's scattered sheats
She yet may glean some remnants,—some poor grains
To cheer her life.

Nero. Enough ! Go, Granius.

Come, my Poppæa, Tigellinus, come.

We'll see how far the sculptor has advanced

My golden statue ; then, if you're not tired,

We'll take a look at the new theatre.

END OF ACT IV.

ACT V.

SCENE I.—*Imperial Palace.*POPPEA *and* NERO.*Pop.* Whence come you, Nero?*Nero.* From the chariot-race.*Pop.* Were you among the racers?*Nero.* Ay, I was.

Pop. Oh, Nero, Nero! Have you lost all pride,
 All sense of dignity, all proper heed
 For what becomes a Cæsar; that you thus
 Degrade your rank, and, 'mid a mob of grooms,
 Whip o'er the course—and, covered with foul dust,

Reeking with sweat, delight in such applause ?

Fie ! Nero !

Nero. Peace ! Poppæa—heed your words !

Pop. I say 'tis shameful.

Nero. And I say—Great gods !

I'll not be railed at thus—not even by you !

Pop. Nero, be wise,—abandon all these games ;
They but degrade you in the public eye.

Nero. I did not take you for my tutor.

Pop. Still,

I pray you, hear me, Nero !

Nero. And what's more,

I bid you hold your peace now,—do you hear ?

Pop. I say no more.

Nero. What ! shall I ask of you

Where I shall go, what I shall do, and say ?

Pop. You were not wont to speak to me like this.

Nero. Well, now I speak so.

Pop. As you will, my lord.

Yet heed my counsel. Give up these mad pranks ;

They ill become you.

Nero. Oh yes, give them up ;

And stay at home to play with you all day,
And coax and flatter you.

Pop. Nay, those glad days
Are gone for ever—gone beyond recall.
Where are you going now?

Nero. What's that to you?

Pop. Nothing—and yet so much.

Nero. Why, this indeed
Is like my mother ; so she raved and stormed,
I should go here, go there—at her sweet will ;
Do this—do that. Next thing, you'll threaten me.

Pop. Forgive me, Nero, I am sick at heart.

Nero. And I am sick of you, and all this talk.

Pop. Stay with me, Nero—cherish, comfort me.
I've need of it. You know I love you, dear ;
'Twas for your good I spoke.

Nero. Take off your hands ;
I'm in no humour to be coaxed and stroked.
Leave me alone, I say.

Pop. Nero, take heed ;
Be not so violent. You hurt me, dear ;
You hurt the little creature in my womb.

Nero. Damn it and you. Nay, do you cling to me?
Off with you!

[*Throws her away violently—she falls.*

Pop. Ah, Nero! you have killed me—you have killed
Not me alone—but——

[*She faints.*

Nero. Gods! what have I done?
Why did she cling to me? Did she not see
That I was angry? Help there! Help, I say!

Enter TIGELLINUS.

Tigel. Did you call, Cæsar?

Nero. Yes, I called; look there!

Tigel. Great Jove! it is the Empress! What is
this?

Nero. She clung to me, and would not let me go.
I flung her off. She cannot be much hurt.

[*Lifts her.*

How ghastly white she is! Poppæa, speak.
She does not answer. Lift her to her couch.
Poppæa, speak. It's all a feint—a trick.
Go, call her handmaids—go!

Tigel. I go at once :
First lift her to her couch. There, that is right.

Nero. Go—by the gods !

[TIGELLINUS goes out.]

Poppæa, speak to me !

Pop. Ah ! ah !

Nero. Poppæa, speak. I never meant
To harm you. Are you hurt? How are you now?
'Tis I—'tis Nero. Answer me, I pray !

[*Opens her eyes and stares vaguely round.*]

Pop. Where am I ?

Nero. In my arms. Are you much hurt ?

Pop. Not much—not much.

Nero. You're better, are you not ?

Pop. Much better. Never mind.

[*Faints again.*]

Nero. She's gone again.

Enter TIGELLINUS, with attendants.

Lift up the Empress : bear her to her room.

You, Tigellinus, go call Xenophon :

Bid all to care for her—do all you can ;

She's frightened more than hurt.

Tigel.

I will, my lord.

[*Exit TIGELLINUS—they carry her out.*]

Nero. The Fates are all against me—I have lost
A second time an heir. Why, why should she
So cling to me? at such a moment, too!
And all for jealousy—mere jealousy!
Women are all the same. By all the gods!
They only strive to thwart and anger me!

SCENE II.—*Street in Rome.*

HELIUS, SABINUS, SILIUS ITALICUS, GALERIUS

TRACHALUS.

Sab. How long is this to last?

Trach.

How long indeed?

Nero grows madder daily. In debauch,
Folly, and riot, all his time is spent;
And now to meet his vast extravagance,

Since not the revenues of all the state
Can cover it, with desecrating hand
He strips the temples, pillages the shrines
Devoted to the gods—nothing is safe.

Sil. No thing nor person,—not Philosophy
Could save Musonius or Seneca.

Virtue availed not to ward off the blow
From Pœtus and Soranus. Justice bent
Its head before him when Longinus fell.
But why enumerate?—the catalogue
Is all too long that he has writ in blood.

Trach. Is he insane?

Hel. Insane in head and heart.

Insane of purpose, filled with passions mad.
Insatiate of praise. He knows no check
To any wild desire that stirs in him.
One cannot count an hour upon his mood ;
Fickle, as vain ; mad now for this, now that ;
Gay, voluble at times ; then cruel, stern,
And speechless,—wild with sudden, senseless fears,
And starting at vain shadows, like a horse.
Despising all the gods, save Isis, whom

He spits upon at times, and all the while
So superstitious that he dare not move
Without an omen, or an augury.
Oh, life with him is a perpetual curse,
And a perpetual fear.

Sil. It is indeed.

For me, I hate him most and trust him least
When that insufferable smile of his,
Baleful and cruel, gleams through his white teeth—
Cold as an Arctic sun on ribs of ice—
When all his words are smooth, and his tongue oiled,
And he is bland and courteous. That, I know,
Portends some horror.

Trach. How long—ah, how long
Shall we endure this tyrant—where's the end?

Sil. God knows; and yet I fain would hope, not
long.

Already in the provinces one feels
The pulse of tumult. If revolt gets head,
His power will melt and fall with one great crash,
As falls the avalanche.

Trach. God speed the day !

I hear in Gaul the mutterings of a storm,
Where Vindex governs ; over Spain there broods
Dark discontent,—so Galba writes. If once
Rebellion break out there, and pour on Rome,
Nero is lost. Unless, indeed, he take
His harp, and charm the army by a song,—
Soldier we know he's not ; and then, besides,
Who'd follow him, if he should take up arms ?

Hel. He take up arms ! Yes ! in the theatre—
Not in the field. If once revolt breaks forth,
He'll rave and rage, and run to save his life.

Trach. We talk, talk, talk. Gods ! for some hand
to do.

Hel. What can we do ? We can but plot and plan
As Piso did—and earn his fate—no more !
Thus making life more hideous. Here in Rome,
Ever some traitor in a plot there is.
No—we must wait until the army moves.

Trach. Then let us hope the time will not be long.

SCENE III.—*Imperial Palace—Poppæa's room.*

NERO, POPPÆA, and XENOPHON.

Nero. How feel you now? Does not the pain abate?

Pop. I'm dying.

Nero. Dying? No, you shall not die!

Pop. I'm dying, Nero! No, not all your power
Can save me now. Farewell!

Nero. It is not true.

You say it but to mock me. Xenophon!

What is the use of you—and such as you—

If you can't save her?

Xen. All my skill is vain;

No mortal hand can keep her here an hour.

Nero. I'll not believe it.

Xen. Cæsar, 'tis too true.

Pop. Ah, yes! my hour has come. Give me your
hand.

Farewell! I loved you, Nero. Think sometimes

Of your Poppæa. Do not grieve--'tis best

Just as it is.

Nero. My best, my only love !

Stay, stay with me ! You cannot—shall not go——

Pop. Farewell !

Nero. No, no ! I will not have you die !

[*POPPÆA smiles, extends both hands to him, falls back and dies.*

Nero. Quick ! Lift her up ! She faints !

Xen. Cæsar !

she's dead.

Nero. What ! Dead ? It is a lie ! Poppæa, speak !

Xen. Nothing can reach her further. She is dead.

Nero. Poppæa ! No ! that heart is still—those lips,
Half parted, breathe no more. Great God, she's gone !
How beautiful she is ! Look, Xenophon,
There lies the only woman that I loved.
You let her die. Why did you let her die ?

Xen. Death we can give, but life we cannot give.

Nero. Yes, she is beautiful ! How still she lies !
How perfect in her calm ! No more distress,
No agitations more ; no joy—no pain.
I'll keep her as she is. Fire shall not burn
That lovely shape ; but it shall sleep embalmed—

Thus—thus for ever in the Julian tomb.
And she shall be enrolled among the gods.
A splendid temple shall be raised to her,
A public funeral be hers, and I
The funeral eulogy myself will speak ;—
And this is all. She never will come back—
Never will smile—never will sing again.
Pity—oh, what a pity—Xenophon !
See to it that she be embalmed, I say,
And all her beauty kept just as it is.
There, my Poppæa, sleep—

Look, Xenophon,

I thought she smiled and moved ! You're sure she's
dead ?

Xen. 'Twas but a light that glanced across her face—
A breath of wind that dallied with her hair.

Nero. You're sure ?

Xen. Quite sure.

Nero. Stay, and keep
watch on her.

Perhaps—who knows ?—life may come back again !
I'll go and sacrifice to Isis now.

SCENE IV.—*Camp in Spain.*

GALBA, VINDEK, OTHO, T. VINIUS, *and*
others.

Vind. The time is ripe ; we only wait for you.
Say but the word, we'll place you on the throne.
Enough we have endured ; Rome calls to us
As she lies bleeding 'neath that tyrant's heel,
Bids us awake, arouse, and set her free.
Speak, Galba ! be our head—our emperor !

Otho. Ay, Galba, we are all in this agreed.
Give us your pledge. Think upon him who slew
Our dearest friends, and drive him from his place.
Think of our country over whom he broods
Like some dread incubus—and shake him off.
Let virtue yet be possible in Rome.

Gal. If I accept, 'tis not because I crave
That gilded circle. 'Tis not that I feel
Ambition's goad—but that my country calls,—
My bleeding country, trampled under foot

By this wild despot, by this bloody boy,—
This riotous, debauched, and murderous boy.
I am the legate of the Senate here,
And of the people—bound to act for them—
Ready to sacrifice my life for them.
Yet I am old ; age, cares, have thinned my blood ;
And better peace and rest would suit my wish
Than to be lifted high, where every blast
Would shake me. Still, unto my country's call
I yield ; and, though I do not take the crown,
As legate of the Senate I accept
The leadership. Do with me as you will.

Otho. Thanks, noble Galba ; not from us alone,
But from all Rome, from all Rome's provinces.
There's not a soldier in the ranks but pants
To be led on against our common foe.
The generals are with us, all of them—
Save as the voice runs, Rufus, who commands
In Upper Germany. Yet have I hope
He, too, will join us—nay, am sure of it—
Once we get speech of him, as soon I shall.

Gal. Virginius Rufus is a noble man,

Of virtue, daring, and integrity ;
He can but scorn and hate, as all of us,
The low, lascivious tyrant and buffoon.

Vind. Therefore, I count on him.

Otho. Be sure we may.

If he hold back, 'tis not that he would prop
This tyrant up, but that he hesitates
On his successor.

Gal. Put me, then, aside ;
Offer my place to Rufus ; I shall yield,
And thank him to assume its heavy cares.

Otho. No—you shall be our leader ; we on you
Alone can concentrate our utmost power.
We will stand with you—all the army will.

Gal. Legate of Rome I am, and nothing else,
But I am ready.

Vind. Be it thus ; and now
Only remains to organise our plans.
Rufus persuaded, without bar or let
We march to Rome ; trust me, he will not stay
To meet our army ; rather we shall find
The tiger, changed into a hare, has fled ;

And all Rome open with one single voice
To clamour welcome and to cheer us home.
He is not valiant, and his vices cling
So close about him in their foul embrace,
That they have killed his manhood out of him.

Otho. Ay; should he have the courage, from his
side

All would fall off, as, at the first rude shake,
The leaves of winter from a frost-struck tree.
The ghosts of all the dead that he has slain
Would gather round him, mock at him, and cow
The best part in him. He will die ten deaths
Before he sees us, entering through his ears!

Vind. Shake, Nero! shake upon your throne! We
come!

Hark, Rome, we come to free you from your yoke!

Gal. Your words put fire into my blood. I feel
Five lustra younger.

Vind. To the balcony!

The soldiers wait us. Let them hear your voice.

[*They go to the balcony.*]

Soldiers, behold our Cæsar! Health, and life,

And victory to him, and to our arms !
 We go to Rome to shake from off his throne
 The bestial tyrant that oppresses all ;
 The villain that has wallowed in the blood
 Of father, mother, brother, master, wife ;
 The wretched singer, fiddler, player, groom ;
 The cruel master to whom all are slaves,—
 You, I, and all that groan beneath his rod.

Soldiers below. Galba shall be our Cæsar !

Gal.

Nay, not so ;

I am but legate of the Senate here.

Say, will you strike for freedom and for Rome ?

Give us your voices—Rome and victory !

Sold. Rome ! Rome and victory !

Vin.

Again ! again !

Sold. Galba shall be our Cæsar ! Lead us on !

Rome ! Rome ! and death to Nero !

Gal.

Ay, that's well.

Give us your good swords, we will cut our way.

Each soldier on his helmet's crest shall wear

The laurel leaf ; and plumèd Victory

Fly o'er our golden eagles ; the wide air

Shall sound with full largess of ringing cheers ;
Rome shall cry out her thanks ; mothers hold up
High in the air their babes to welcome you ;
Children with silver treble shout ; old men
Come tottering forth, eager to grasp your hands ;
Friends grapple you with joy in their embrace ;
And Rome shout welcome from a million mouths !
Let us in resolution, then, be stern,
To free our country, whatsoever betide—
All with one spirit fired, one wish, one hope,
One watchword—Death to Nero, Life to Rome !

SCENE V.—*Imperial Palace.*

NERO, SPORUS, SABINUS, *and* TIGELLINUS.

Nero. Sporus, in you Poppæa lives again ;
My poor Poppæa, whom the Fates have torn
From out these arms. Your eyes, your face, your hair,

Bring her again before me.

Sab. Ay, in truth

He much resembles her.

Nero. Resembles her !

It almost seems as if she still were here,

He is so like her. By great Jupiter !

Were you a maid, I swear I'd marry you !

Spor. Oh, Cæsar, Cæsar !

Nero. Nay, I would, I say.

And, as it is, you mind me so of her,

Boy as you are, I'll wed you ; ay, I will.

Tigel. Think, Cæsar—think on what you say !

Nero. I do ;

And, all the more I think, the more I say

I'll marry him.

Tigel. Think, Cæsar, what the world,

Which likes you not too well, would say of this.

Nero. What care I for the rabble, and their talk ?

To me 'tis nothing—I am Cæsar still ;

Who shall prevent me doing as I choose ?

Tigel. I pray you, Cæsar, yield not to this whim.

Love Sporus, if you will ; there let it end.

Nero. Say, Sporus, will you wed me? Say, dear boy!

Spor. Cæsar, I am your slave, and if you will, I must obey; but press me not to this.

Nero. I will, I say: you do not love me then?

Spor. Cæsar, you have been ever kind to me.

Nero. I will be kinder,—all things you shall have—
Pomp, station, fortune, everything you wish.
Let them, who dare, rail at me, I will see
The tongue that threatens never wags again!
Nay, Tigellinus, never shake your head,
Nor look so sour. I have made up my mind.
See that the marriage-rites are all prepared.
I'll wed him. Yes; by Jupiter, I will!
Now come with me, my Sporus, come with me!

[*Exit NERO and SPORUS.*

Tigel. This is the maddest freak of all as yet.

Sab. It is the wildest, most insensate freak.
Yet, it were useless to oppose his will.
Give him loose rein, perhaps he'll tire of it.

Tigel. He'll do it. He grows madder every day,
Despite the growling voices all around.

Sab. He loved Poppæa to the very last,
And since he lost her, ever thinks on her.

Tigel. Ah, poor Poppæa ! Ay, I truly think
That cruel work of his half staggered him ;
He has not been so reckless in his crimes
Since that sad day.

Sab. Perhaps ; but in debauch,
Riot, and folly, and mad vanity,
He has excelled himself.

Tigel. Ay ; since he went
To the Olympic games and won a crown,
And came in triumph home, he has indeed
Grown mad with vanity.

Sab. You say, in crime
He is less reckless now ; yet call to mind
The singer whom he fiercely put to death
When, at the Isthmian games he sang too loud,
And drowned our Cæsar's voice ; and think again
Upon old Corbulo whom with false words
He lured to death. Think on Soranus, too,
And Pœtus——

Tigel. No, I will not think of them :
We in his hands are all like plaster dolls
That a child plays with ; in a fit of spite
He crushes best or worst ; no one is safe.
Not you, not I, if in his way we come
When the mad fit is on him.

Sab. Do you think
He'll marry Sporus ?

Tigel. If he choose, he will ;
And if he choose will kill him the next day.

Sab. Let him alone, and hinder not his whims.
Praise him—no praise is too extravagant—
Praise him in all things—for his sword, harp, song,
His chariot-driving, painting, sculpture, all,
And he will smile upon you and caress ;
Thwart him, he is a fierce and dangerous Fate !

Tigel. Well, we must bow our heads, and let him go ;
'Twill not be long, I think, before he falls.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE VI.—*Imperial Palace.*NERO *and* SABINUS.

Sab. Cæsar, there's black news from the provinces.

Nero. What news?

Sab. The Spanish troops are in revolt ;
Galba is at their head, and all the Gauls
Have joined him under Vindex.

Nero. Galba, too?
Galba revolted? Why, I thought his head
Had fallen from his shoulders. My commands
Were for his death.

Sab. He rose to arms at once,
Called on his soldiers, who made part with him.
They have proclaimed him Cæsar. Otho, too,
Has joined them. They are marching on to Rome.

Nero. What ! Marching on to Rome ? Great
Jupiter !
What's to be done ?

Sab. Rufus in Germany,

So run the tidings, with his army stands
In opposition, not from love of you,
But hate of Galba. 'Tis our only chance,
They quarrel there together.

Nero. Let them fight,
And tear each other,—curses on them all !
Ah, this was then the meaning of my dreams !

Sab. What dreams, my Cæsar ?

Nero. Ugly, ugly dreams.
I dreamed I was on shipboard at the helm,
Which suddenly was snatched from out my hand.
Another time Octavia came to me,
And dragged me off into the dark, and there
Black wingèd ants with stings swarmed over me,—
Disgusting ants. Once suddenly my horse
Was changed into an ape, but still his head
Neighed plaintively ; and only yesternight
I thought the Mausoleum-gate swung back,
And from within a ghastly, fearful voice
Cried, “ Nero ! Nero ! ” and I started up
In terror, while the cold and beaded sweat
Oozed out all over me ; and shivering there

I stood and listened in the awful night.

No one was near : I called, and no one came :

“ Help ! help ! ” I cried, and no one answered me.

Sab. 'Twas but a dream.

Nero.

It was a ghastly dream.

I cannot shake it off ; it clings to me.

Oh, all is over ! all is over now !

They will dethrone me.

Sab.

Rouse, my Cæsar, rouse !

'Tis time for action, not for fears like this.

These are but shadows,—rouse and meet the facts.

Time flies ! Oh, summon all your energies,—

Clear up your thoughts,—something must now be
done.

Nero. I cannot act ; I have no power to act.

What can I do ? If they march on to Rome,

They'll drive me from my throne. Do you not see,

They'll drive me from my throne !

Sab.

Cæsar, as yet

The power is in your hands,—yield not to fear.

Nero. What can I do, Sabinus ? All is lost.

Ah, I would rather die than lose my throne !

Sab. 'Tis not the time to die ; but live, and act.

Nero. I will. Oh, let me think ! What shall I do ?

(After a pause.) Curses upon them all—I'll strangle
them,—

All the commanders—all the governors !

Sab. They are not in your power ;—this will not do.

*[Nero pauses again—walks up
and down in great agitation.]*

Nero. Then all the exiles, all the Gauls in Rome,
I'll massacre !

Sab. This would inflame revolt,

And give new vigour to your enemies.

*[NERO pauses—throws himself on
a couch, buries his head in his
hands—then suddenly rises.]*

Nero. What shall I do, then ? I'll set fire to Rome,—
I'll poison all the Senate at a feast,—

I'll let the wild beasts loose to tear them all !

Something I'll do : I will not die without

Some horrible revenge ! Would they were all

Here in my hand,—I'd crush them all like flies !

I'd tear them as I tear this robe of mine,—

There ! there ! and there !—I'd tear them up like that !
And fling them off like that ! and that ! and that !—

(*Pause.*) Why don't you speak ? why don't you speak,
I say ?

You have no pity on me : there you stand,
And will not help me.

Sab. Cæsar, I await

Some definite command : what shall I do ?

Nero. Do ? do ?—There's no one here to strike a
blow,—

No one to help me ! Do you think they'll come ?

Sab. I fear they will. [*A pause.*]

Nero. Well, then, I'll go to them

Defenceless—without arms—in mourning robes ;

I'll throw myself before them, and shed tears :

And, touched by this, they'll surely help me up ;

And gather round me, and repent, and pray

Forgiveness. Then I shall forgive them all,

And we again will enter into Rome ;—

And all will cry, “Hail, Cæsar ! Cæsar, hail !”

And I next day will come before you all,

And chant myself the chant of victory.

Say now, Sabinus, is't not well conceived?

They will embrace me,—I am sure they will,—

And cry out, “Long live Cæsar!” That is best.

Sab. Summon your strength up, Cæsar. Do not lean
On this weak reed, or you will fall indeed.

Nero. No, no! that is the plan,—not a word more.
No need to fight. Now leave me: I must think
Upon the chant that I shall sing to them—
The chant of Victory. Go, go, good friend!
It shall begin—go, leave me! See you not
I must compose the chant to Victory?

Sab. Cæsar, I take my leave. Think, think of it,—
And do not trust to such an idle scheme.

[SABINUS goes to the door.

Nero. Stop! say, how old is Galba?

Sab. Seventy-three.

Nero. Almighty gods! then all indeed is lost!

Sab. Why, Cæsar?

Nero. Know you not the oracle
That said the fatal number—seventy-three—

Should mark my death? I thought it was my age :
 But now, I see 'tis Galba's. I am lost !
 Lost ! lost ! Oh, curses on their oracles,
 That flatter while they lie ! Whom shall we trust,
 If the gods lie to us ?

Sab. Cæsar, be calm !

Nero. Go, leave me !—No, stay with me ! Can it be
 That the gods lie? Did they not promise me?—
 Are they not bound to what they promise, say?
 I'll not believe it. No, I will not die !
 I—die ! why, I am only thirty-two !
 They promised seventy-three ; say, did they not ?

Sab. Ay, Cæsar, so you say,—so it was said.

Nero. Then they are bound to it,—I shall not die !
 Now, go ! and leave me to compose my chant.

[SABINUS *goes out.*

Nero (*drawing out the little figure of a child, which
 he wears on his person as a talisman*).

Speak, if my time is come,—if not, keep peace.

'Tis silent. Thanks, thanks, thanks !—ah, I shall live !

SCENE VII.—*Camp in Spain.*

GALBA, OTHO, T. VINIUS, CORN. LACO.

Officers—Guards—Attendants.

Gal. We have lost Vindex, and in him have lost
The right arm of our cause.

Otho. It was indeed
A grievous loss. He was of royal blood,
And had a heart of royal qualities ;—
Ready to serve, and able to command,—
Of high ambition for all noble ends,
Manly, unselfish, just ;—of earnest will,
And quiet conduct,—loyal to his friends,
Firm to his principles,—upon the field
An able leader ;—and in losing him
Much we have lost.

Gal. Ay, we have lost the heart

Out of this enterprise ; while he was here
Our cause was strong. Bereft of him, I feel
The doubts, the dangers, that encompass us.

Otho. We have marched on so far, that nought
remains

But to march on. Our cause is still the same ;
Nero still lives and rules. To falter now
Were to court Death to us—Ruin to Rome.

Gal. Was it by his own hand he fell at last ?

Otho. I do not think it. All was a mistake.
Rufus and he in their long conference
Had, as it seemed, agreed in everything.
As he returned, by some unhappy chance
The soldiers in the camp of Rufus thought
They were attacked, and fell on Vindex' train,
And in the wild confusion he was killed.
Then Rufus by his soldiers was proclaimed
As Cæsar, but he steadily refused,
Declaring that the Senate should alone
Proclaim their emperor ; and thus things stand.

Gal. All is confused and broken up by this.

My strength is gone, my will is gone from me ;
Better that I withdraw—for I am old.

This thing has cowed the better part of me.

Otho. You shall not leave us. You shall not withdraw.

Friends, help me with your voices.

Vin. That I will.

Our lot is cast together ; we will win
Or lose together. Closer let us draw.
One man—a noble one indeed—is fallen ;
Close up the ranks, then. Shall one death dismay ?
Nay, though a hundred deaths were in our path
We must go on.

Laco. Must—ay, and will—I say !
Look up, good general, let not your heart
Be clouded now. Who comes ?

Vin. 'Tis Icelus.

Enter ICELUS.

Gal. What ? Icelus !

Icel. Hail, Cæsar !

Gal. No, my friend.

I, the mere legate of the Senate here——

Icel. Hail, Cæsar! For the Senate has proclaimed
That you are Cæsar,—no mere legate now.

I post to bring the tidings. Rome is up;

Nero is lost; his friends fall off from him.

All voices are for you.

Gal. You bring such news,
I scarce can credit them.

Icel. And yet, they're true.
Cæsar you are.

Gal. Then, let my first act be
Him to reward who brings such welcome news.
Take this gold ring—you are a Roman knight!
Your title "Marcianus" from this day.

Icel. Thanks, Cæsar! I will strive to bear the rank
So that I shall not tarnish my new name.

Gal. All smiles—no more delay—let us march on.

Otho. Ay, onward, friends; onward at once to
Rome!

SCENE VIII.—*Imperial Palace*—NERO and companions
at supper.

TIGELLINUS, PHAON, SPORUS, HELIUS, SABINUS.

Nero. So, Vindex says I know not how to play !
Curse him for that ! I'll have his head for it.
Had he but said I know not how to rule,
'Twould not have vexed me. But to say of me
I am not skilled in music ! I, whose head
Was crowned in Greece for this same noble art ;
The Furies tear him ! Know you any one
More skilled than I am, Tigellinus ? Say.

Tigel. Cæsar, you are the first in all the world.

Nero. Ay, so they say in Greece. When supper's
done,
I'll show you instruments by me contrived
To play by water ; and when Vindex' head
Is brought to me, I will exhibit them
Upon the public stage, and all shall hear.

Tigel. Ay, Cæsar, and all Rome will then applaud.

Nero. And as for Galba,—that old sordid fool,
Who dares revolt,—seize on his goods and slaves !
At least we'll have our pleasure out of them.

Tigel. He never used them, miser that he is !

Nero. Well, well ! we'll teach him how to use them
now.

“Ahenobarbus,” am I ? So, they say,
He dares to call me. Let him ; he shall find
The “Brazen-beard” will prove a brazen-hand
To strike him to his death, the bald old knave !
Who's there ? A messenger ? What news—what news ?

Enter a Messenger.

Mess. Cæsar, good news. Vindex is dead, they say.

Nero. Ah, ha ! my Vindex—who's the “Avenger”
now ?

Vindex, indeed ! Great Vindex down so low !
Rise, friends ! This cup to Jupiter I pledge,
The liberator. And how came his death ?

Mess. He by Virginius Rufus was attacked,
And by the soldiers slain ; or, as some say,

By his own sword he perished.

Nero.

Take that cup

For the good news you bring. Now for a song,
And let the theme be Vindex. Bring me quick
My harp! We'll have a whole night of debauch;
Ay, wild debauch! So, then, he thought to shake
The Cæsar from his throne—the wretched fool!
But who is here?—Another messenger?

Enter a Messenger.

Well, and what news bring you?

Mess.

Great Cæsar, hail!

A letter from the army in the west.

[*Hands it to him—NERO reads.*

Nero. Ha! What is this? “The armies all have
joined

In the revolt with Galba. Like a storm
They march to Rome. There is no hour to lose.
Cæsar must summon all his energies
To meet them in the field.”

’Tis all a lie!

Tigel. Pray God it be !

Nero. Oh, damn them,—damn
them all !

Oh, would I had them here—here in my hands,—
I'd smash them like these vases—there ! and there !

[*Dashes two Homeric vases on the ground.*]

Tigel. Patience, great Cæsar.

Nero. Nay, I'd kick them down,
Just as I do this table. Curse them all !

[*Kicks over the table.*]

(*To the first messenger.*) And as for you. Seize him—
away with him !

Tear out his heart ! Tear out his lying tongue,
That told those stupid tidings ! Off with him !

Mess. Pardon, great Cæsar—I was forced to bring
This hapless message.

Nero. Curs'd be he who brings
Bad tidings ! He shall live to bring no more !

[*They carry him out.*]

(*After a pause.*) All is lost now ; they'll be upon me
soon.

What shall I do? Where shall I fly? Go you,
Bid them make ready vessels for my flight.
Freight the whole fleet at Ostia for my use;
Send there my instruments,—all, all of them.
Call all the tribunes and centurions in;
Go call them, Helius—call them in at once!

[HELIUS goes out.

Where shall I go? What shall I do? I say,
Speak, Tigellinus!

Tigel. Nay, I scarce can say;
All things look black.

Nero. All, all is lost! all lost!
Look, Tigellinus, Phaon, all of you,
If I should to the Parthians fly, and there
Seek Galba; fling myself upon my knees,
Ask pardon for the past, surrender him
The throne in Rome, and offer in its stead
To take command of Egypt,—do you think
He would refuse me?

Tigel. Ay, my lord; I think
What he would give would be the naked sword;

What he'd refuse would simply be your life.

Nero. What shall I do, then? Somewhere I
must fly.

Enter HELIUS with Tribunes.

Oh, my good friends, dear friends, my faithful guard!
The enemy is coming, from my seat
To drive me,—but I will not have more blood;
No—I will fly from here, and lade the fleet
With all my treasures. You must go with me,
To guard me and protect me in my flight.
I count upon you,—you may count on me,—
And lavishly will I your faith reward.

[*They remain silent.*]

What! Silent all? What mean you?—why is this?

1st Tribune. We cannot be the guardians of your
flight.

2d Trib. We must remain in Rome.

3d Trib. Our duty's here.

Stay here; we will attend you.

Nero. See you not

I cannot stay? To stay here is to die.

4th Trib. Is it so terrible to die?

Nero.

Great God!

You have no pity on me. Leave me now,

But stay without and don't abandon me.

[*They go out.*]

I will put on my mourning robes, and go

And ask forgiveness at the Rostra. There

The people will uphold me and forgive——

Tigel. Stay, Cæsar! They would tear you like wild
dogs

Ere you had reached the Rostra.

Nero.

Gods!

Hel.

Ay, stay;

Outside this house your life's not worth a straw.

Nero. I will not go, or not to-day at least.

I'll think it o'er to-night.

[*Fumbles in his robes.*]

(*To himself.*) Where is my box?

Ay, here it is, and poison in it, too.

This is the only friend deserts me not

When all is lost. This I will take with me.

Stay here, dear friends, I will go out a space.

Something I must resolve upon, and soon.

Stay,—wait for me.

[*Exit* NERO.]

Tigel. What's to be done?

Sab. You stay here, if you choose ;

I leave the palace.

Tigel. Whither do you go ?

Sab. To cast my lot with Galba.

Tigel. So shall I.

Nero is lost ; his life hangs on a thread ;

And so do ours who here with him remain.

Come, Helius, are you with us ?

Hel. Ay, indeed ;

Why should I stay ? The house shakes ; ere it fall,

Let those flee out of it who love their life.

[*Exeunt* TIGELLINUS, SABINUS, and HELIUS.]

Pha. They all drop off.

Spor. And are you going too ?

Pha. No, I remain.

Spor. I, too. He was to me

Ever a kindly master ; I have fed

Out of his bounty ; I will stay with him.

Pha. You have a man's heart! What a crew is
this

Which just have fled! Foul suckers that drop off
When they no more can on their victim gorge.
This Tigellinus ever goaded him
In all his vices; with unwearied zeal
Abetted all his crimes; in his debauch
And riotous excesses pushed him on,—
Fed on him, flattered him, and ducked to him,—
Within his sunshine basked, and buzzed, and stung;
And, now the shadow comes, off, like a fly,—
A pestilent and stinking fly,—he goes!

Spor. It is the nature of such things as he,—
Such black-and-yellow-banded wasps, that cling
To the ripe fruit, and rot it as they feed.

Pha. Nay,—ever liked he better carrion.
Shall we wait here, or in the ante-room?

Spor. Let us withdraw. If Cæsar need our aid
He'll summon us, whenever he returns.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE IX.—*Imperial Palace.*

NERO *alone, midnight, on his couch asleep—awakes.*

Nero. What noise was that? Ho, guards! Where
are you all?

No answer: have they left me? Ho, I say!

Phaon! Epaphroditus! Silence still?

I am abandoned,—all of them are fled:

Avaunt, I say!—what shadow is that there?

My mother's shape—my mother's voice: she calls—

She calls me. No! I say, I will not come!

Away, grim shadow! Ah! 'tis gone at last.

My hour is come,—'tis time to end it all.

Where is my box of poison? One small drop,

And I shall sleep, never to wake again.

Where is it? Gone? gone? Everything is gone!

They've stolen all,—plate, hangings, vases, cups;

Nothing they've left me,—no, not even a knife,

Not even my poison,—not even death itself!

Spicillus ! Ho, Spicillus ! come to me,—
Come, kill me, for I cannot kill myself.
Spicillus ! No ! Even he is gone, even he,—
My gladiator ! Ah ! no friend have I,
Not even an enemy,—they all have fled.
No dagger, even ! How then shall I die ?
The Tiber,—ah, the Tiber !

[Rushes out, and returns in a moment.]

No, no—that is too awful. No, not that ;
How cold, how cold it is. I shiver here !
Great God ! who's there ? Britannicus ? No, no !
Away ! I did not kill you—'twas a fit.
Shake not your head,—lift not your threatening hand.
You, too,—my mother,—do not smile on me,—
It is too ghastly. No, it is not come,
My hour has not yet come—Who, who are you
That crowd behind me in the shadow there ?
'Tis all a lie ! Help ! help ! They threaten me,—
They mock me ! Off, off ! Oh, this river of blood
That pours along the floor, and wets my feet :
'Tis rising, rising ! I shall drown in it !

Help ! help ! Away, ye phantoms !

They are gone.

Thank God, they are gone ! Where am I ? Am I mad ?

What is it that has happened ? Some one, speak !

What shall I do ? Oh God, will no one come ?

Phaon ! good Phaon ! Sporus ! Any one !

Ho, Phaon !

Enter PHAON.

Pha. Cæsar, have you called me long ?

I slept, and only at this moment heard.

Nero. Oh, Phaon, Phaon ! I am all alone ;

All have abandoned me.

Pha. Cæsar, not all—

Sporus, Epaphroditus, I, am here,—

Also Menecrates.

Nero. Where are the guards ?

Pha. They all have fled.

Nero. We, too, must flee at once.

Will you desert me too ?

Pha. Nay, count on us ;

We will be faithful, even to the last.

Nero. We must begone. Oh, whither shall we go?

Pha. I have a villa, lying close to Rome,
'Twixt the Salara and Nomentan gate,
Four miles away. There you might hide yourself,
And wait events, for danger threatens here.
Off from the road it lies half hid by trees,
Embowered in vines,—secluded, out of sight,
A humble place, but safe.

Nero. Let us go quick,
Before the daylight comes! Oh, Phaon, thanks!
The dark will hide us from all prying eyes.
Call them, call all of them, and let us flee.

Pha. They are here, Cæsar, in the ante-room.

[*Calls them in.*

Enter MENEKRATES, SPORUS, EPAPHRODITUS.

Nero. We must begone at once, ere the day comes.
Will you go with me? You are all my train?

Spor. I will.

Epaph. And I.

Men.

And I.

Nero. Oh, is it come
To this? Well, well, let us be off at once!

Pha. Stay! let me lace your sandals on your feet.

Nero. No time for that. I'll go with naked feet,
Just as I am, this old cloak will suffice.

Stop! let me hide my face—a handkerchief—
Thanks, that will do. You would not know me now?

Pha. No one would know you thus.

Nero. So! That is all.
Go, get the horses.

Great God! what was that?

Pha. 'Twas thunder.

Nero. Let the lightnings strike me, then;
They cannot strike a poorer, lower man.

Come! come! Farewell, my house; farewell, my joy!

I go, like *Œdipus*, a wanderer

Into the storm, out into the black night—

What matters where, since death is everywhere.

[*Thunder—they go out.*]

SCENE X.—*Forum.*

TIGELLINUS, SABINUS.

Sab. Whence comé you, Tigellinus, and what news?

Tigel. Cæsar has fled. I from the palace come.

Sab. Cæsar has fled?

Tigel. Ay.

Sab. Whither has he gone?

Tigel. I know not.

Sab. Who went with him—any one?

Tigel. I cannot learn, for no one saw him go.

Sab. Whom found you at the palace?

Tigel. Not a soul.

The place was all deserted; not a guard
Was at his station;—all the doors were wide;—
Dead silence everywhere. No sound of life,
But the resounding echoes rolling dull
Along the vaulted galleries and halls,
As on from room to room I vainly searched.
All in disorder,—tables overthrown,—

Curtains torn down,—the floor with fragments strewn :
Smashed vases, broken chairs, and lamps, and plates
In ruin massed. The guards had wrecked it all
Before they fled. A miserable sight !
I called aloud, but no one answered me.
Life had gone out, Death entered in its place.

Sab. Where has he fled ?

Tigel. By the Nomentan gate—
So rumour runs—he from the city passed.
’Twas early dawn—a black and stormy dawn,—
The thunder pealed, incessant lightning flashed :
And, as a band of five rode out the gate,
Earth quaked and shuddered ; and the steed of one,
Scared by a corpse that lay upon the road,
Started aside, when from his rider’s brow
The handkerchief in which ’twas swaddled up
Dropped, and disclosed the white and ghastly face
Of Nero. So at least Missicius says,
And he, as a prætorian guard, should know
The face of Nero. He saluted him ;
But Nero took no notice. Some one then
Cried out to them, “What are the news in Rome

Of Nero?" Nought they answered, but rode on.

Sab. Think you 'twas he?

Tigel. It may have been, who knows?

If he it were, the sounds of the near camps
Shouting, "Hail, Galba!" "Death to Nero!" must
Within his ears have sounded like a doom.

Sab. Poor, silly Cæsar!—there's an end of him.

Tigel. Ay, and an end of all those glorious nights—
The riot, and the dances, and debauch,—
The singing, harping, chariot-racing,—all!

Sab. The worse for you,—the better for all Rome.

Tigel. That wretched Galba! He a Cæsar! He
Who never spent a penny all the year,
The dirty miser! Otho comes with him,—
My voice shall be for Otho. He will make
Old Galba but a stepping-stone to power.

Sab. He is an honest man, if nothing else.

Tigel. Honest? bah! You'll hear what the army
says,

When he can't find a gold piece in his purse
To chuck to those who split their throats for him.

Sab. What will be will be,—he who lives will see.

SCENE XI.—*Villa of Phaon, room underground—
early morning.*

PHAON, SPORUS, MENEKRATES, and EPAPHRODITUS.—

*Nero on a wretched mattress, covered with an old
cloak.*

Pha. Courage! Oh, sink not down in such despair:
Here, we are safe.

Nero. Ah, God!

Spor. Nay, groan not so;
Dear Cæsar, do not weep so bitterly!

Nero. Hist! hist! what's that?

Pha. 'Tis but a breaking branch.

Nero. Oh, what a night! How horribly the wind
Rages and groans! Hark! is there no one there?

Spor. 'Tis but a bird that flutters through the leaves.

Nero. See, how my hands are torn!—my cloak's wet
through,

And stained with filthy mud. Fill up that hole
Through which we crept.

Spor. My Cæsar, are you cold ?

Nero. Yes—no,—I know not !

Spor. Take this cloak of mine.

Nero. Thanks, Sporus. Is there nothing here to eat ?

Pha. Nothing but this black loaf, I fear.

Nero. What ? that !

Take it away ! Is there no water here ?

Pha. I know not,—I will see ; ay, here is some,
Turbid, and scarcely fit to drink, I fear,
But all that I can find.

Nero. Well, give me that ;
I die of thirst. How stale and warm it is !
Oh, what a drink for Nero ! Pah ! enough !

Pha. I dare not go for more—'tis now too light :
Some one might see me, and so track you here.

Nero. Stay ! stay ! You're sure that no one followed us ?

Pha. I think not ; will you try to rest awhile ?

Nero. I cannot rest ; I shall sleep soon enough
A sleep that all the thunders of the earth
Will never break ; nothing remains for me
But death—death—death !

Epaph. Summon your courage, then,

And meet it like a man,—all men must die.
 You, I, and all of us. All we can do
 Is to die bravely.

Nero. Yes ! yes ! yes ! to die.

Give me a dagger.

Epaph. Cæsar, there it is.

Nero. Is the point sharp ?

Epaph. 'Tis sharp enough to kill.

[NERO takes it—feels the point—shudders,
 and returns it to EPAPHRODITUS.]

Nero. I cannot. No, not yet ; 'tis not yet time.

My grave is not yet dug ; first dig my grave.

Pha. Cæsar, we will.

Nero. There, Phaon ; dig it there.

[*They dig a grave.*]

Mark it out longer. Phaon, go and bring
 Water, and wood to heat it, that at least
 Some decent burial rites you may perform
 To my poor corpse. My corpse ! great gods ! no, stay !
 Some one will see you. This, then, is my grave !
 Pave it, Epaphroditus, with these slabs
 Of broken marble,—so. Ay, that is right.

My grave ! my grave ! And is it come to this,
Menecrates ?

Men. Oh, Cæsar, do not weep !

Nero. Think what an artist perishes in me !

Men. Ay, Cæsar.

Nero. I shall never act again ;
Never shall play ; never shall sing again ;
Never shall model ; never paint again ;—
All's over now ! It is so hard to die ;
I am so young ; oh cruel, cruel fate !
Is't not, Menecrates ?

Men. Ay, 'tis, my lord.

Death always comes too soon,—to young and old.

Nero. But I am still so young. I meant to dance
The Play of Turnus. Oh, so many things
I meant to do !

Epaph. Cæsar, one thing remains—
The last—to do. Be brave—die like a man !

Nero. I will ! I will ! First swear that none shall lop
My head from off my trunk when I am dead.

Pha. My lord, we swear.

Nero. Hark, there is some one comes !

Who is it, Phaon ?

Pha. 'Tis a courier.

Nero. Then they have tracked us ?

Pha. So it seems, my lord.

No—'tis a friend.

[*Courier enters with a letter to PHAON.*]

Mess. A letter.

Nero. Read it, Phaon. What is it ?

Pha. Cæsar, I read : The Senate judges you
To be an enemy,—ordains your death
After the "ancient custom."

Nero. What is that ?

Epaph. To strip you, thrust your neck into a fork,
And, thus transfixed, scourge you to death with rods.

Nero. Great God ! it cannot be !

Epaph. Cæsar, it is.

Nero. Give me the daggers. Ay, their points are keen ;
They will let life out very easily.
And then, death, death,—blank death ! Farewell, my
friends !

Farewell !

[*Puts the daggers to his breast—then
recoils and throws them down.*]

I cannot, oh, I cannot do it !
My fatal hour is not yet come.

Epaph. Be brave,
Cæsar, and strike !

Nero. I cannot. Take them, you.
Strike yourself first, and teach me how to die.

I know not how to do it. Teach me how.

Men. Strike, Cæsar ! End it ! 'Tis not hard to
die.

Nero. Oh, Sporus ! weep for me. Begin the
wail,
For I must die !

Pha. Cæsar, protract no more.

Nero. Oh, Phaon, oh ! Will no one die with
me ?

I cannot strike. Yet, living thus, I live
A shameful life. Nero ! decide at once !
This life becomes you not—becomes you not ;
Rouse, rouse yourself, and act !

Hark, what is that ?

“The sound of the swift-footed horses now strikes
on my ears.”

The hour has come.

[*Seizes the dagger and stabs himself,
but ineffectually.*

Epaphroditus, help !

[*Epaphroditus assists him to kill
himself.*

Enter Centurion.

Cent. How ! Dying ? Let me staunch his blood
with this.

[*Covers the wound with his cloak.*

Nero. Too late. Is this your fealty ?

[*Dies.*

Pha.

He is dead.

Sporus. How his eyes stare ! 'Tis fearful—hor-
rible !

Pha. A frightful sight ! There ; cover up his face.

Epaph. Oh what a life was his ! And what a
death !

Sporus. Nero ! farewell ! Yes, I will weep for
you,

For you were ever good and kind to me.

Cent. Lay him out straight upon his couch. Compose
His straggling limbs, ere back to Rome we bear
This senseless clay—once Cæsar, nothing now ;
Once lord of all—now lorded o'er by Death ;
That he, cold corse, one triumph more may take—
His last, his funeral triumph to the tomb.

THE END.

